

23. Mrz. 2016

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## Strategies of Contention. Right-Wing Extremism and 'Counter-State Terror' as a Threat for Western Democracies



This is the fourth article in our series *Trouble on the Far-Right*. For more information on the series, please click [here](#).

by Daniel Koehler

Terror from the extreme right has again gained a wider public attention in 2011 with the devastating attacks carried out by Anders Behring Breivik in Norway and the detection of the right-wing terrorist cell called "National Socialist Underground" (NSU), which had committed ten murders, three bombings and a dozen bank robberies during more than a decade of time in Germany. In many Western countries violence motivated by racism, anti-government hate, anti-Semitism or other aspects of right-wing extremism, appears to be a regular part of criminal activities. Hate crime legislation and statistics vary strongly but show that next to high intense terrorist attacks such as 9/11, the attacks in London, Madrid or Paris, right-wing violence and terrorism is the most dangerous politically motivated threat. In the United States for example [Perliger \(2012\)](#) counted 4,420 right-wing terrorist incidents between 1990 and 2012 causing 670 fatalities and 3,053 injuries. In Germany official statistics counted 69 right-wing attacks between 1990 and 2015 causing 75 casualties, while [civil society watchdogs count up to 184 deaths](#). In Russia [some experts](#) speak of approximately 450 right-wing motivated killings between 2004 and 2010. Nevertheless, this specific form of political violence remains largely under-researched and misunderstood as non-terroristic. In consequence the threat from the far right is continuously downplayed with severe consequences for victims and the internal security.

### Strategic Considerations

Right-wing terrorism in this article is understood as the use or threat of specific forms of middle to high distance violence (e.g., explosives, shooting, arson) executed on the ideological premise of inequality between human beings and in order to challenge the political status-quo, – i.e. the monopoly of force – through the act of violence as a form of psychological and physical warfare. Typical additional motives can be to demonstrate the authorities' weakness, to cause chaos favouring 'law and order' based politics, frame left-wing groups and cause a government crack-down, annihilate key individuals of the 'enemy', destroy infrastructure perceived to be vital to the enemy, prove the movement's stamina to members, and gain political or social power through a reign of fear.

[Experts](#) have observed that right-wing terrorism differs from other types of terrorism in a number of dimensions, most notably the regular absence of any public communication policy connected to the attack. This silence has prompted some scholars to argue that this organized clandestine violence from the far right could not be called 'terrorism' per se. Nevertheless, one aspect worth exploring here is the specific right-wing terrorist strategy or doctrine coined by Italian neo-fascists and researchers as '[strategy of tension](#)'. In this concept Italian right-wing terrorist are dedicated to "[inciting](#)

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violence and disorder so as to create the state of anarchy, from which public demand for the restoration of law and order will spring and enable the neo-fascists to assume power and govern Italy as a totalitarian state". The similarity to the Russian concept of 'counter-state terror' is obvious, which also aims to destabilize the political system and to cause panic in order to achieve a "neo-Nazi revolution". While the Italian concept on the one hand saw the (conservative parts of the) government as allies and aimed at creating a political climate which would be favourable for right-wing parties, the Russian model on the other hand sees the whole government as a target. Aiming to destroy government legitimacy (i.e. the safeguarding of the population) through terror and violence, 'counter-state terror' from the far right in essence, is a form of low intensity insurgency warfare.

## Saving the Race and Bringing Back the Reich: Right-Wing Terrorism in Germany

Most countries do not provide detailed information about their right-wing terrorist structures, such as comprehensive statistics and research. In absence of this information, it is possible to learn something about this form of political violence from the German example in order to understand the particular nature of that threat.

Looking at the (estimated) number of active far right extremists the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz BfV – the German domestic intelligence service) **counted 21.000 activists in 2014**. German authorities regard 50% (10.500) of those as "violence oriented", meaning they are prepared to use political violence to advance their goals. Although the number of activists has slightly decreased over the last years (e.g. 22.150 in 2012) the number of right-wing motivated crimes certainly did not. In 2014, German authorities counted 1.029 violent hate crimes ("right-wing politically motivated") including **more than 900 cases of criminal assault** with a right-wing extremist motive. Overall violent hate crimes increased with 22.9% and criminal assaults by right-wing extremists increased by **23.3% compared with 2013**. Although no official statistics for the right-wing motivated crimes in 2015 exist yet, the number of violent attacks against refugee shelters will almost certainly guarantee a record high. **In 2015, 901 attacks against refugee shelters with a clear right-wing motive (compared to 199 in 2014)** show a visible radicalization within the movement.

Looking at data on extreme right-wing terrorism, the **German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS)** has compiled the most extensive database on terrorist violence from the extreme right after the Second World War currently including qualitative data regarding 91 identified right-wing terrorist actors (groups and individuals) since 1960.

According to the **Database on Terrorism in Germany DTGrwx**, the main characteristics of right-wing terrorism are the tradition of small unit tactics, the lack of public communication and the strong role of the government as a target. Almost half of all identifiable actors are between two and nine members in size. An additional quarter are lone actors, meaning that more than 70% of all right-wing terrorist actors between 1963 and 2015 in Germany had only nine or less members. The tactics used by right-wing terrorists mostly include bombings, assassinations, and arson, and rarely hostage taking or kidnapping. One of the most distinctive aspects of right-wing terrorism in Germany is the lack of public communication regarding the attack, e.g. through letters, statements, and communiqués. Of all the actors who carried out attacks successfully and unsuccessfully (around 45% of all actors in the database) only about a quarter used any kind of identifying mechanism. In general, public statements by right-wing terrorist actors

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rarely contain concrete political claims or programs. In most cases swastikas or similar symbols and statements disparaging the victims or target groups were found at the crime scene.

Based on the DTG dataset in Germany it can be validated that right-wing terrorists see government representatives and institutions as their main enemies and targets next to ethnic minorities or immigrants, as well as Jewish people. Destabilizing the government's monopoly of force can be seen as one of the main goals of right-wing terrorists, which does not require elaborated or sophisticated public communication strategies. In addition, right-wing terrorists display many characteristics akin to guerrilla style groups regarding the general tactical usage of violence and terror. 'Leaderless resistance' and collective right-wing terror carried out by **fluid and more or less spontaneous groups of effectively ideologicalized** individuals are not a new phenomenon in the militant clandestine far right.

As the DTG database and examples from other countries show, right-wing terrorism is a security threat largely underestimated by Western authorities. The widespread tactical sophistication in deploying small cell and lone actor operations – as proven by the NSU case – should warn police and intelligence officials against looking for Jihadist or RAF-like symptoms and characteristics of terrorism in the extreme right-wing movement. There won't be any. This in turn increases the risk of misunderstanding right-wing violence as low-level hate crimes or subcultural disorganized violence, while right-wing terrorist actors and incidents could be overlooked and downplayed.

## White Supremacist Insurgency Worldwide?

Looking at other widely known acts of right-wing terrorism in Europe and North America, several striking similarities are evident. Most incidents were also a) carried out by individuals or small groups, b) involved explosives, and c) targeted 'foreigners', 'Jews', or government representatives d) without a public claiming afterwards. The **bombing of the Bologna train station in Italy on 2 August 1980**, for instance, which killed 85 and wounded more than 200, was carried out by two members of **Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR)** – a splinter cell of the right-wing terrorist group Ordine Nuove in order to frame left-wing extremists.

Similarly, the devastating attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995, which **remains one of the most lethal terrorist attacks in the history of the United States** next to 9/11, was carried out by anti-government right-wing extremist Timothy McVeigh and two accomplices using a car bomb without any publically expressed demands or statements. In planning the attack McVeigh was also inspired by the explicitly **racist and anti-Semitic** *Turner Diaries*, which has been called "a bible of the extremist right". As these books explicitly glorify small and leaderless resistance cells fighting against a corrupt government in a racial civil (or holy) war without any public claiming for attacks, the impact on the tactical level of right-wing terrorism can hardly be underestimated. As the detailed analysis of the German case and these international examples show, militant right-wing movements around the world have largely adopted these approaches.

In addition to militant anti-government extremism, racism was also a common theme among other right-wing terrorist actors. Four years after the Oklahoma City attacks, in April 1999, the British neo-Nazi David Copeland orchestrated **three nail bomb attacks in 13 days in London**, causing 3 casualties and wounding 137. Copeland was a long-time member of several neo-Nazi organizations in England and targeted homosexuals and immigrants with his attacks. Another (foiled) attempt of right-wing terrorism

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became public in the United Kingdom in 2009, when the neo-Nazi Ian Davison and his son (as part of the right-wing terrorist organization 'Aryan Strike Force') planned attacks with chemical weapons against ethnic minorities, manufacturing a **large amount of the poison ricin**. On 5 August 2011, the US neo-Nazi Wade Michael Page also **fatally shot six and injured four during an attack at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin**.

## Conclusion

This short overview has shown that right-wing terrorism displays unique characteristics and constitutes a highly dangerous and lethal form of political violence. In order to assess this threat adequately and to formulate effective counter strategies on all levels, including the work of the police, courts and civil society organizations working against right-wing extremism, much more research and analysis needs to be done about that threat. Another important step is to recognize the dangers posed by this tactically highly covert and long-term oriented violence with a major focus on destroying government structures. As most Western countries have prioritized jihadist terrorism as the number one enemy, resources of police and intelligence have been reduced and many countries' law enforcement agencies have barely looked at the extreme right. The German National Socialist Underground (NSU) case shows, how the focus on high impact attacks publicized by the perpetrators can mislead and open up windows of opportunity for those terrorists who aim to wage asymmetrical warfare against an enemy they perceive as occupying force. More akin to guerrilla organizations these terrorists rarely need publicity as their major goal is to continue in their struggle against their enemies. Violence is their main message and the resulting condition of fear is in fact destabilizing the governments' authorities and dissolving the rule of law as well as trust into the democratic culture.



**Daniel Koehler** is Director of the **German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS)** and co-founder of the **Journal for Deradicalization**. He built the first **database on right-wing terrorism in Germany** and conducted the most extensive study on German right-wing terrorism so far, appearing as a monograph with the **Routledge Series on Fascism and the Far Right** in summer 2016.



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