Beyond the 'Lone Wolf': Lone Actor Terrorism and the Far Right in Europe

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Lone-ness and Lone Actors

- Key issue: are current concepts for understanding self-directed types of violence coming from far right cultures more helpful or more of a hindrance to understanding this phenomenon?

- 'Lone Wolf': a problematic term, and often steeped in media clichés.

- The research into this area to date draws out a crucial point: there is no clearly discernible 'profile' of a far right lone actor terrorist.

- Lone actors have varying levels of 'alone-ness', and the focus on 'lone' can be problematic.

- Daniel Koehler: Director of the German Institute on Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation: Europe has recently experienced a 'revival of militant right-wing extreme groups, networks and incidents'. This includes violence from individuals and small groups.

Role of ideology

- Far right ideologies are highly diverse, ranging from neo-Nazi to Islamophobic.

- Ideology helps the protagonist imagine they are connected to a wider community of support, with aims and goals.

- Each lone actor will have different levels of ideological sophistication, and they will acquire this in different ways.

- Ramon Spaaij: Ideology is crucial, in particular, for helping the attacker enter into a mental space where they believe they have some form of moral justification in acting in a violent way.

Personalisation

- Personalisation of attacks is also a typical feature of lone actors.

- Far right lone actor terrorists do not act merely act out of generally held grievances articulated by far right ideologies, but use ideology and personal grievance together to generate specific worldviews that, for them, legitimise terrorism.

- David Copeland combined hatred of immigrants with his own experiences of homophobic bullying to develop his targets.

- This issue of personalisation helps to explain the highly idiosyncratic nature of such attackers.

- Yet how 'alone' are they? RUSI's recent analysis of lone actors suggests that just under half exhibit some form of 'leakage' related to their attack before perpetration.

Mental health

- Mental health is a common feature of far right lone actors.

- From depression to narcissistic personality disorders, there are no clear patterns that suggest specific mental heath conditions are crucial.

- Studies are also divided on whether lone actors demonstrate a significantly higher level of mental heath issues compared to the wider public.

- RUSI's recent report summarised the issue as follows: '35% of the perpetrators reportedly suffered from some kind of mental health disorder [and] the estimated percentage [of such disorders] for the general population is 27%'.

- This is certainly a common long-term factor, but metal health should not be highlighted to inadvertently exclude other crucial issues.

Online radicalisation

- Online radicalisation has become a common feature of far right lone actors since the 2000s.

- The Internet now offers a wide array of material, from the pragmatic (i.e. bomb making instructions) to the ideological (i.e. books such as *The Turner Diaries*), as well as access to sympathetic communities (i.e. Stormfront.org).

- While the 'dark net' seems less useful for facilitating terrorism, the 'darker areas' of the surface web certainly provide easy access to motivational and instructional material used by many lone actor terrorists.

- Manuela Caiani and Linda Parenti have highlighted the complex ways online activism is making the far right more transnational as well as leading to a more decentralised organisational style.

Long term and short term factors

- Paul Gill's research shows regularly occurring long term factors can include:
  - Previous criminality; on-going social isolation; a history of mental illness. These are issues experienced by many people, and so these alone do not really explain far right radicalisation.

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- They can combine with short term factors, which commonly include:
  - Sudden intensification of ideological beliefs; experiencing a stressful life situation; a problem in a personal relationship; changing address; becoming unemployed.

- A potential lone actor may lose a job, perhaps in part though a mental health or other long term factor, resulting in having time and opportunity to develop a deeper ideological belief. From this position, someone may decide to act violently and then develop an attack.

Categorising far right lone actors

- Adaption of a model proposed by Raffaello Pantucci:

  ▫ **Loners:** those who have little to no two-way interaction with wider far right communities and are almost entirely self-radicalised

  ▫ **Lone actors:** those who have a much more engaged set of interactions with far right organisations, but decide to step beyond their limits and engage in terrorism

  ▫ **Small groups:** those who come together in pairs, threes or small clusters to create a new group which acts independently of pre-existing larger far right organisations

Loner: Pavlo Lapshyn

- Ukrainian postgraduate student, Pavlo Lapshyn, came to Birmingham as part of his studies in April 2013.

- Once in the UK, he planted three improvised explosive devices at mosques in June and July.

- Before this, he attacked and killed an 82-year-old Muslim grandfather, Mohammed Saleem.

- Police investigations found he had no on-going links with wider far right groups, either in the UK or Ukraine, though his social media accounts certainly demonstrated a high level of idealisation of other far right terrorists.

Lone actor: Zack Davies

- On 24 January 2015, Davies went to a local branch of the British supermarket Tesco armed with a claw hammer and a machete. While shouting 'This is for Lee Rigby, Davies attacked a customer who 'looked Asian'.

- He also told police interviewers that 'it was like Europe was under siege. My personal issues and paranoia and political world events all combined.'

- Prior to this attack, Davies was active in National Action, an overtly National Socialist organisation notable for promoting neo-Nazi training camps featuring training in using knives and unarmed combat.

- The group clearly played a crucial role in Davies' radicalisation, and he met with its other activists offline, though the attack itself seems to be one that Davies himself initiated alone rather than being directed by National Action's leaders.
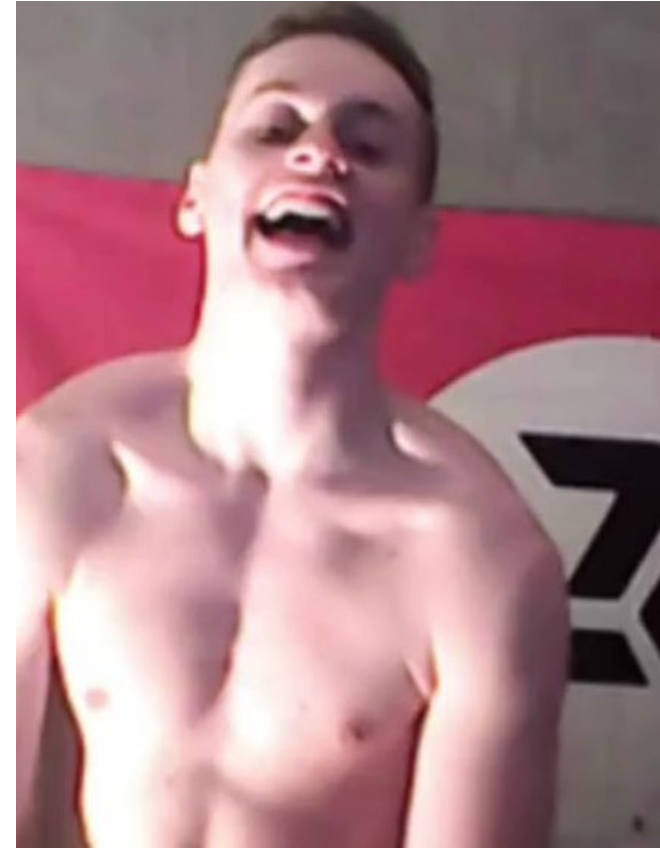
Groups: National Socialist Underground

- The National Socialist Underground's three members, were active in the German neo-Nazi milieu, and decided to go 'underground' following police investigations into their activities.

- Between 2000 and 2011 the NSU carried out murders, and engaged in other criminal activity to sustain their underground actions, such as bank robberies.

- The case reveals the ways in which a wider community of support sustained such activity, as the organization had on-going links with other neo-Nazi and extreme right activists in Germany at the time.

- Case led to several high profile resignations from the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution.

Monitoring and detection

- Daniel Koehler, Director of the German Institute on Radicalisation and De-Radicalisation, stresses focus on Islamist terror threats has led to a poverty of knowledge on the far right in policy circles in recent years.

- RUSI: 40% of all detection of far right lone actors was primarily through chance. In contrast, 88% of religiously inspired lone actors were detected through intelligence.

- RUSI's analysis of lone actors also explains:
  - 'Government bodies and law-enforcement agencies should examine their policies and procedures to ensure they are understanding and prioritising the right-wing threat appropriately, and dedicating sufficient resources to mitigate it'.

Tackling extreme right activity

- Vidhya Ramalingam *Old Threat, New Approach: Tackling the Far Right Across Europe*:

  - Creating a comprehensive, long-term plans to tackle social issues posed by far right activity, including ensuring the existence of long-term funding sources for initiatives to challenge racist attitudes;

  - Developing robust and consistently enforced legal frameworks for talking hate crime and issues of discrimination;

  - Ensuring that all areas of the state, local and national, work in a coordinated manner to tackle issues posed by the far right, and also ensuring state sector organisations work effetely with credible NGOs that are engaged with tackling the far right;

  - Funding specific programmes to help people leave far right groups (such as Exit-Germany or Small Steps in the UK).