'Only Bullets will Stop Us!' – The Banning of National Action in Britain

by Graham Macklin

Abstract

This article explores the banning of National Action (NA), a small, violent national-socialist group, which, in December 2016, became the first extreme right-wing group proscribed by a British government since 1940. It charts how NA evolved from public order irritant to its designation as a 'terrorist' group. Following a short overview of NA's history and politics, and the circumstances in which the government banned it, the article assesses the ban's impact upon its activists and milieu. Several subsequent trials have highlighted the ban's success in dismantling NA as an organization. However, this case study also suggests that it has engendered a period of ideological and organisational adaption as former activists sought out new modes and methods of activism to enable them to circumvent the ban, highlighting the tactical flexibility of extreme right militancy. In line with the wider literature, this case study finds that although the ban succeeded in deterring some activists, others remained defiant, continuing to operate clandestinely until the police disrupted their activities. The article concludes with a discussion of where the ban has been less successful, highlighting the protracted difficulties faced by the authorities in eradicating NA's digital footprint - one of the aims of banning the group in the first place, since the tools to do so lie with social media conglomerates and are thus largely beyond government control.

Keywords: National Action, extreme right, terrorism, political violence, proscription

Introduction

There is an ongoing academic debate regarding the extent to which ostracizing or banning groups moderates or radicalizes their supporters; does resorting to such legal instruments make matters better or worse? In essence, is proscription an effective counter measure against terrorist and extremist organisations?[1] Have bans on extreme right-wing groups reduced mobilization, or simply provoked solidarity and resistance, thereby exacerbating the very tendencies that governments are trying to prevent? Studies of the German case, for instance, indicate that the failed effort to ban the Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands served only to increase the organizational and strategic flexibility of the extra-parliamentary extreme right whilst also hardening its ideology and ghettoization.[2]

This article explores such hypotheses regarding the impact of banning extreme right-wing groups with reference to a case study of National Action (NA), a small, overtly national socialist, youth-oriented, *groupuscule*, which in December 2016 became the first extreme right-wing group banned by the British Government since 1940. NA, which was founded in 2013, was proscribed under section 3(3)(a) of the Terrorism Act (2000), hitherto used principally against a plethora of Islamist and Irish Republican groups. As such, it was the first extreme right-wing group in British history designated as a 'terrorist' organization even though the group itself had not carried out a 'terrorist' act *per se*. Indeed, one early scholarly analysis published in 2014 concluded that 'National Action activists like to hype themselves as genuine threats to the state. Yet despite being unwaveringly fascist and National Socialist in political orientation, and idealizing violence online, in itself the *groupuscule* – to date – is in no position to develop its revolutionary agenda, and seems wary of carrying out violent acts too.'[3]

That being the case, this article explores how NA evolved from public order irritant to its designation as a 'terrorist' group. It provides a short overview of NA's history and politics, the circumstances under which the government banned the group and the outcome of the ban. Whilst proscription successfully dismantled NA as an organization, this article also finds that its impact was similar to bans on extreme right organisations in Germany. It engendered a period of ideological and organisational experimentation and adaption as those

activists undeterred by the ban sought out new modes and methods of activism through which to circumvent it, highlighting the tactical flexibility of extreme right militancy. In line with the broader literature, the case study also finds that whilst the ban succeeded in deterring some activists, others carried on regardless. Equally importantly, with regard to the successful enforcement of repressive measures, the article highlights the protracted difficulties faced by police and politicians in eradicating NA's digital footprint, one of the aims of banning it in the first place, when the tools to do so lie largely beyond their control.

Precursors

NA emerged in early 2013, following the implosion of the extreme right British National Party (BNP) and the similarly sharp decline experienced by the English Defence League (EDL), an anti-Muslim street movement. The genesis of the group is located in the activities of two individuals, Benjamin Raymond and Alex Davies. Raymond, a former politics student harbored views that were extreme by any measure: 'There are non-whites and Jews in my country who all need to be exterminated. As a teenager, *Mein Kampf* changed my life. I am not ashamed to say I love Hitler,' he wrote in one internet post.[4] By 2005, he was attending meetings of the 'New Right', an esoteric 'meta-political' lecture group.[5] Discontented with their activities, Raymond focused his energies upon the Integralist Party of Great Britain (IP). Given the demands of full-time education, he prioritized online activities including its website, publications, and a range of blogs, as a means of developing and disseminating his ideas, many derivative of Oswald Mosley's British Union of Fascists.[6]

IP was politically insignificant in itself, but served as an organizational and ideological crucible for the formation of NA. IP's digital presence brought likeminded activists together. Through IP, Raymond met Alex Davies, a sixteen year-old Young BNP (YBNP) activist who became the group's 'principal organizer.' He held similar anti-Semitic views as Raymond: 'I don't want to say what I'd like to do to Jews – it's too extreme.' The BNP's 'disarray' perturbed Davies, as did the inertia of the extreme right movement in general.[7] Other future NA activists met online too, coming from websites like 4chon.net, an image board site notable for its racist and anti-Semitic posts which had been established in 2011 after the 4chan website expunged its /new/ (news) section.[8]

During this same period, Raymond's personal online activities expanded. As 'Benjamin Noyles' he was an administrator on the IronMarch.org (IM), an extreme right forum founded in September 2011 whose masthead declared 'GAS THE KIKES, RACE WAR NOW, 1488 BOOTS ON THE GROUND!' IM became an increasingly important transatlantic outlet for violent activism. Whilst IP served as a meeting place for several future NA leaders, digital activism also served to facilitate their ideological radicalization. Raymond, who honed his own graphic skills whilst promoting IP, likened the image board culture to Social Darwinism, which extinguishes 'weaker' messages and narratives: 'It's only the extremes that come forward,' he stated, reflecting upon a process of ideological outbidding which clearly influenced the future trajectory of the group.[9]

National Action - Ideology and Action

Raymond credits Davies as NA's founder, stating that he became involved after Davies asked him to author a strategy document regarding the requirements needed for a new political group to succeed.[10] Their analysis of the BNP's failure was a 'major factor' informing subsequent efforts to 'rebrand' racial nationalism.[11] Younger than many activists, Raymond, Davies, and their colleagues sought to carve out a 'space' for militant youth within an increasingly decentralized and fragmented 'movement'. From the outset, NA differentiated itself from other groups, ideologically as well as tactically. Posturing as a revolutionary national socialist group, they consciously conceived of themselves as a youth-oriented 'vanguard' movement whose role, as political and spiritual elites, was to channel 'hatred and rage' and to 'use it to shatter the decaying power of the enemy.'[12]

The ideological inspirations for NA militancy, its glorification of Nazism, open racism and anti-Semitism, were contrary to the 'modern' BNP whose organisers had sublimated their own ideological militancy behind a veneer of anti-Muslim 'national populism' and an electoral strategy influenced by the localism of the Liberal

Democrats. This was ideologically insipid when compared with figures like 'Tesak' – Maxim Sergeyevich Martsinkevich, leader of violent Format 18 group – and White Rex, a Russian mixed martial arts promotor and clothing brand with extreme right sympathies, venerated by Raymond. He also admired groups like CasaPound in Italy though he found it 'ideologically questionable' because he viewed it as being evasive about its core beliefs. These groups provided a model for emulation; a recipe for reinvigorating a British milieu which, after following an electoral route for fifteen years, viewed street activism as something 'alien' to its culture.[13] The failure of the BNP's 'quest for legitimacy' amplified NA's efforts to appear as a dynamic alternative. They appeared oblivious to the irony that the 'moderate' BNP strategy they disdained derived from an analysis of the utter failure of previous waves of overt national socialist politicking.

Eschewing the ballot box, early NA activism concentrated upon militant street action: leafletting, banner drops, and 'flash' demonstrations largely, though not exclusively, gravitating upon the West Midlands. NA carried out some of these actions in tandem with activists from the British Movement, a small national socialist *groupuscule* founded in 1968 by British national socialist ideologue, Colin Jordan. Mirroring the strategy pursued by the 'Alt Right' in the United States, NA staged a series of headline grabbing actions on British university campuses, helping to establish its name. Notably they also interrupted a lecture by Trotskyite intellectual, Alex Callincos, at Warwick University where Alex Davies was a student, though media exposure of his activities soon ended his studies.

Within six months of the group's foundation, Raymond could boast that NA 'has succeeded in turning a web-based idea into an authentic real world organization.' This included honing its 'brand' by presenting a distinct style and visual aesthetic at demonstrations with activists dressed in black, with sunglasses or half skull masks. This was not necessarily novel. NA imbibed much of its aesthetic appeal from the 'autonomous' national socialist movement in Germany which in turn had adopted and adapted many of the stylistic accourrements of the anarchist Black Bloc movement. NA used its distinctive identity to build its appeal and, Raymond noted, to assist young activists evade the attention of the Prevent counter-terrorism programme. 'People were attracted to the look of the organization,' stated Raymond, who was responsible for many of groups' graphics. 'We embraced quite a lot of modern aesthetics, which is something that modern organizations have failed to catch up on.'[14]

It was an anti-Semitic 'trolling' campaign launched in August 2014 by Liverpool-based NA activist Garron Helm, against the Jewish Labour MP Luciana Berger, which put NA on the map, however. Helm received a four-week jail sentence after tweeting Berger a picture of herself with a Star of David superimposed on her head with the hashtag #HitlerWasRight. Helm's imprisonment led the US Daily Stormer website to orchestrate an international 'trolling' campaign against Berger. She was subsequently deluged with over 2,500 anti-Semitic tweets, many using the hashtag #FilthyJewBitch.[15] Police subsequently arrested ten NA activists, thwarting a planned demonstration outside Berger's office.[16] Unperturbed, NA continued its intimidation of Berger, publishing an article entitled 'Reap the whirlwind' on its website together with an interview with an unrepentant Helm. Notably, NA also injected this anti-Semitic invective into its street activities, including during a demonstration in Leeds (described as 'an absolute shoah') and the desecration of a Jewish monument in Birmingham, which was filmed and placed online. In speeches activists railed against the 'disease of international Jewry' whilst promising 'When the time comes they'll be in the chambers.'[17]

NA gained significant attention in January 2015 when Zack Davies, 26, from Mold, Flintshire, attempted to murder Sikh dentist, Dr. Sarandev Bhambra Sandip, with a machete outside a supermarket whilst shouting 'White Power' and 'this is for Lee Rigby' – a reference to the fusilier murdered by jihadists outside his barracks in London. The intervention of a former soldier saved Sandip's life. Davies told police he was an NA member, though Raymond publicly denied knowledge of him.[18] Davies had been active, however, on the IM forum using the name 'Rockerz88'. Following his arrest IM changed his status to 'gassed'. Davies was jailed for fourteen years.[19]

Whilst NA made common cause with like-minded groups (Davies participated in several events organized by the London Forum for instance), its relationship with others was uneasy. NA staged a 'Step it up White Man'

demonstration against 'grooming' (child sexual exploitation) by gangs of, largely, Muslim men in September 2014 and thereafter several NA activists took part in a 'unity' demonstration in Rotherham, South Yorkshire; a town where social services estimated that perhaps as many as 1,400 young girls had been abused. NA were unimpressed by the personal conduct of many EDL members, some of whom were inebriated or on drugs. The waving of Israeli flags by EDL activists particularly offended NA's anti-Semitic sensibilities, leading them to declare, 'weakness on the Jewish question is simply unforgivable, ignorance is inexcusable.' NA and EDL activists physically clashed at a subsequent Rotherham demonstration in July 2015.[20]

Increasingly, NA were emboldened to move beyond small 'flash' demonstrations to organize larger scale activities. The first was the 'White Man March' in Newcastle in March 2015, which ended in nine arrests. This was notable for the presence of an alleged recruiter for the ultra-nationalist Ukrainian Azov brigade, interesting in itself given NA's pro-Ukrainian stance.[21] In August, they alighted upon Liverpool as the site for a further 'White Man March', sending a menacing letter to the city mayor that Liverpool 'will go up in flames' if the march was prohibited. 'Only bullets will stop us!' they declared.[22] In fact, the demonstration was a humiliating defeat for NA. Confronted by scores of angry opponents, police locked the small NA contingent inside a left-luggage facility in Liverpool Lime Street Station for their own protection, which ended their march before it began.[23] NA announced two subsequent Liverpool marches, both of which failed to materialize, before they traveled back to the city, unannounced, for what amounted to a photoshoot.

These failures broadly corresponded to a ratcheting up of the group's rhetoric. The same month as the initial Liverpool demonstration took place, the group uploaded a video to its YouTube channel calling for 'White Jihad' – partly a satirical publicity stunt but also a declaration, 'that we are open challengers to the system, that we are world changers, that our faith is as strong as any religion, and that we have staked our claim...Everything we need to become the rebellion of the age is already in place; the fear, the glamour, the terror, the presence, it is all there for the taking, all that is left it for us to embrace it.'[24] NA activists returned to Newcastle in January 2016 to stage a deliberately provocative '#HitlerWasRight!' demonstration, coinciding with Holocaust Memorial Day.

NA membership, which numbered approximately 100 activists organized into regional groups, was, by its own admission, 'most concentrated' in the North West of the country. Here it allied itself with the North West Infidels (NWI), an extreme right splinter from the EDL, with whom it staged a joint-demonstration on 25 February in Liverpool in a bid to avenge their earlier humiliation. This also ended amidst considerable disorder and led to six arrests.[25] The debacle highlighted the limits of confrontational racist street activism. That same day Western Spring, a blog offering political guidance to the milieu, operated by a former BNP organiser, posted an article entitled 'You Say You Want Revolution' in which its author argued that, whilst demonstrations provided necessary 'battlefield experience,' more often than not they were counter-productive and 'do not have the potential to bring about political revolution.' [26]

NA ignored the entreaty, attending NWI demonstrations in Blackpool, Edinburgh and Rochdale in the following months. Activists north of the border meanwhile allied themselves with the Scottish Defence League (SDL), another overtly racist EDL splinter. NA continued its own provocative activities, holding another '#HitlerWasRight' demonstration outside York Minster, which ended with five arrests.[27] The group staged several other headline grabbing stunts including a 'Miss Hitler' competition that attracted worldwide media coverage.[28] Activists also generated publicity by distributing racist stickers declaring certain areas a 'white zone' mirroring an Islamist tactic of declaring certain areas 'Sharia zones' which had generated similar outrage. Perhaps its most high profile provocation, however, was a visit to Germany in May 2016 where several activists took, and posted online, photographs of themselves Sieg Heiling inside an 'execution room' at Buchenwald concentration camp.[29]

Privately, NA were also staging activities that heightened official concern. In August 2014, NA activists undertook outdoor physical training exercises in the Brecon Beacons. These were organized jointly by Sigurd Legion, led by physical fitness trainer Craig Fraser; White Rex, the Russian mixed martial arts organisation led by Denis Nikitin; and the Western Spring blog.[30] Whilst physical activity was key, Western Spring also

highlighted the opportunities for 'networking, and the promotion of camaraderie and bonds of kinship within the tribe' afforded by these events.[31]

Shortly after the camp, Fraser addressed a meeting in Oxford on 13 September, alongside Finnish extreme right activist Kai Murros, introducing the ethos underpinning the Sigurd camps. Expanding on his future training, Fraser stated: 'One of the videos we're going to show at the next Sigurd camp, we're going to get a projector up and project a jihadis training for ISIS over in Syria, showing them how they train.' Murros replied 'The irony is that we actually need a jihad.'[32] Fraser, who viewed his outdoor training regimen as 'apocalypse training,' had authored *The Centurion Method Training Manual*, which stated:

Violence is the key to manhood, a man who cannot do violence, either to himself, his comrades or his enemies is a dead man. Practice violence then, harm yourself, experience pain, practice the traditions of the day, learn to hunt, to kill, to maim and to dominate in battle. If the laws of the land forbid it, learn what you can within the confines of the law, fight your brothers in the streets of your native lands, become hard, Nietzsche says again become *hard* in all ways. *Worship of hardness in any form, emotional, physical, spiritual.*[33]

Following media exposure, Fraser stepped down from Sigurd for 'personal reasons' and the group was rebranded as Legion Martial Arts Club (MAC).[34] Legion MAC promoted 'national improvement through self-improvement' striving 'to embody the Promethean spirit which is the hallmark of our people.' It described those involved in its training programmes thus: 'A Legionnaire is a man of destiny whose path leads him inexorably to take on new challenges, scale new personal heights and become an avatar for our people in an age of decay.' [35] NA activists continued attending Legion MAC camps; there were at least four more. Such training cascaded downwards to local cadres with local groups organizing their own 'fitness and combat' camps including Mixed Martial Arts and other social activities. Given the philosophical centrality of violence to such gatherings these activities quickly gained political attention. [36]

From July 2015 onwards, the NA website featured a series of articles by Fenek Solère entitled 'Political Soldier Redux,' which valorized the group's youthful activism as that of a 'warrior generation' inculcating the belief that they alone were facing up to 'the inevitable sacrifices required to free Europe from the dark forces that have dominated our continent for decades.' [37] Solère's spiritually infused text had obvious parallels with Derek Holland's seminal text of the same name, which had inspired the national revolutionary faction of the National Front during the 1980s.

'Death to Traitors, Freedom for Britain'

On 16 June 2016, Thomas Mair, an extreme right activist, stabbed and then shot Jo Cox, MP for Batley and Spen, West Yorkshire, as she arrived at her constituency surgery. She died from her injuries at the scene whilst Bernard Kelley, an elderly man who intervened to try to save her, was also seriously injured. Police apprehended Mair nearby. Whilst most groups distanced themselves from Mair's heinous act, NA positively reveled in it; activists' social media accounts glorified Cox's killer as a 'hero.' The North East NA Twitter account menaced 'only 649 MPs to go!' accompanied by the hashtag #WhiteJihad. Another tweet, from the same account, featured a photograph of Mair, stated '#VoteLeave, don't let this man's sacrifice go in vain. #Jo Cox would have filled Yorkshire with more subhumans!'[38] Asked to confirm his name in court, Mair stated 'Death to traitors, freedom for Britain.' NA adopted his words, the only time Mair spoke following his arrest, as their slogan. Found guilty, the judge imposed a whole life sentence on Mair in November.[39]

The following month, on 12 December, the Home Secretary, Amber Rudd, announced she would proscribe NA under section 3(3)(a) of the Terrorism Act (2000), meaning that being a member of, or inviting support for, the group, was now a criminal offence carrying a sentence of up to ten years' imprisonment. This decision, taken 'after extensive consideration and in light of a full assessment of available information,' came into force on 16 December, following a Parliamentary debate the previous day. Rudd banned NA on grounds that it was

'concerned with terrorism.' [40] There are currently seventy-four organisations proscribed by the British state under the Terrorism Act (2000); with fourteen Northern Irish groups proscribed under previous legislation. [41] This was not the first time an extreme right organization had been proscribed by the government. Mosley's British Union was banned using executive powers granted by the Emergency Powers (Defence) Act on 10 July 1940. [42] This was the first time, however, that the government had banned an extreme right organization as a *terrorist* group. Whilst many commentators cited Mair's killing of Jo Cox as the reason for the ban, considerations for the group's proscription were already in motion prior to this event. The Home Secretary had been unable to place the matter before the House of Commons until after Mair's trial had come to an end, for fear of prejudicing the outcome.

Though NA was 'concerned with terrorism', the organization itself had never committed an act of 'terrorism' per se. Nor did the Home Office press release specify one. In part, Rudd's statement focused on the moral rationale for banning the group i.e. its 'vile ideology' which 'stirs up hatred.' Operationally, however, she highlighted the group's continued online glorification of terrorism, which 'frequently features extremely violent imagery and language. National Action also promoted and encouraged acts of terrorism after Jo Cox's murder.' [43] NA had also reveled in the massacre of forty-nine people at 'Pulse,' a gay nightclub in Orlando, Florida, in June 2016, and also disseminated an image depicting a police officer having his throat slit. This was cited as further evidence of its violent proclivities. [44]

The broader aim of the ban was to eradicate the group's 'brand' and ergo its youthful appeal. The Home Secretary was explicit on this point: 'Proscribing it will prevent its membership from growing, stop the spread of poisonous propaganda and protect vulnerable young people at risk of radicalisation from its toxic views.'[45] The police too were increasingly concerned by the numbers of young people becoming either directly involved with the group or turning up on its periphery. Police figures recorded the arrest of twenty-two NA activists during 2016, several of them teenagers, including seventeen-year-old Jack Coulson who posted online that Thomas Mair was a 'hero'. He was arrested with an improvised explosive device in Bradford, West Yorkshire. [46] Home Office figures, released in March 2017, reinforced this view. Arrests of extreme right-wing activists for terrorism offences had doubled since the previous year, reaching thirty-five in total.[47]

Whilst proscription ended NA abruptly, how did its activists respond? The sole academic study, conducted in the immediate aftermath of the ban, speculated that it might very well increase the group's appeal, radicalizing it further, whilst simultaneously being 'very easy' to circumvent, leading to the conclusion that the proscription was 'somewhat impotent, in that it will ban little more than its mere name.' [48] With the benefit of hindsight, however, this assessment was unduly pessimistic; overestimating the capabilities and commitment of NA activists to weather the storm, whilst also underestimating the authorities' own commitment to dismantle the group, which transcended the mere 'symbolic' nature of banning the group, countering the accusation it was a 'one-off' response to the killing of Jo Cox. Indeed, as the remainder of this article highlights, police and politicians took seriously efforts by former activists to perpetuate the group and continue its political goals under a new guise.

Defying the Ban

Despite news of the ban leaking to the media in the days before its implementation, Ben Raymond publicly cast doubt on the prospect. When the government did ban NA, activists vented outrage and dismay across forums and social media. The immediate response was defiance and bravado. The final tweet from the London NA account read: 'Proscription validates our cause. Wir kommen wieder [we will be back]' accompanied by a quote from Adolf Hitler 'Obstacles do not exist to be surrendered to, but only to be broken.'[49] Individual activists were equally dismissive. 'I thought being a "terrorist" would be interesting. Who knew that nothing would change?' bragged one NA activist the day after the ban, ending with the hashtag #NSForever.[50]

Secretly, the NA leadership had already begun preparing to defy the ban, however, holding a secure conference call with their regional organisers prior to proscription coming into force. Christopher Lythgoe, the North

West NA leader who had emerged as a central figure within the group insisted they carry on. Emailing regional leaders shortly afterwards, Lythgoe instructed:

Make sure you maintain contact with ALL your members. Reassure them that they will be personally ok as long as they don't promote NA from Friday on. Make sure that they understand that the SUBSTANCE of NA is the people, our talents, the bonds between us, our ideas, and our sustained force of will. All of that will continue in the future. We're just shedding one skin for another. All genuinely revolutionary movements in the past have needed to exist partly underground. These are exiting times.[51]

Less than two hours after receiving the email, Alex Deakin, the NA West Midlands leader, created a chat group using the encrypted messaging app Telegram in order to covertly communicate with activists after the ban. He called it 'Triple KKK Mafia'. The group had twenty-one adherents whilst a second, more select, chat group called 'Inner' had seven participants. Their clandestine communications, which called for 'race war' and discussed murdering those they hated, only 'intensified' after proscription. This Telegram group, however, would prove the group's undoing.[52]

The day NA became illegal, Raymond emailed to several contacts, including Lythgoe and Deakin, stating that he was 'super excited about working on all the new projects' which included designing visual propaganda for a post-ban formation. Raymond allegedly envisaged the formation of a National Socialist Network (NSN), believing that a new body acting as 'a fluid part of the wider "movement" and not a specific entity' could circumvent the ban.[53] The extreme Islamist group Al-Muhajiroun (AM) inspired Raymond's proposed restructuring. Rather than give up, after it voluntarily disbanded, under government pressure, on 4 October 2004, AM underwent numerous name changes. Whilst each successive group was banned, the structural adaptation that followed begat a more amorphous, milieu-focused activism, still loyal to, but de-centred, from its 'formal' leadership.[54] Raymond apparently conceived of a similarly diffuse role for the NSN, though his preparations to launch the initiative collapsed following anti-fascist exposure.[55]

In February 2017, Raymond, posted a first post-ban YouTube video defiantly entitled 'Defeat Never. Victory Forever.' [56] He subsequently uploaded a lecture to YouTube entitled a 'Nationalist Survival Guide – Arrest' advising activists on how to deal with being arrested, based on his own experience. [57] Though he had continued to actively communicate with other activists through encrypted emails and apps, including the West Midlands Telegram group, Raymond receded from public view. Alex Davies also withdrew from organizational activity, though he continued giving speeches as well as co-hosting the 'Radio Aryan' podcast. [58]

This clandestine activity went hand-in-hand with more overt efforts to continue NA activism. In March 2017, a new group, Scottish Dawn, appeared at a demonstration organized by the anti-Muslim SDL in Alloa, Scotland. This small group carried distinctive yellow flags featuring the Life Rune symbol. They participated in another SDL demonstration the following month. Investigative journalists secretly filmed one of its activists confessing that 'National Action were a good organisation and the stuff we do is very similar.'[59] Several new initiatives that same month further reinforced perceptions of renewed political activity by former NA activists. A website and accompanying YouTube channel for National Socialist Anti-Capitalist Action (NS131) went live online on 12 June as 'a platform dedicated to promoting and spreading NS street art and physical propaganda,' which perpetuated the visual style and aesthetic 'brand' of NA.[60]

The banning of NA and its subsidiaries raises an important question. Was it actually necessary to ban NA in order to dismantle it? For instance, prosecution of the leaders of the Aryan Strike Force, culminating in the jailing of Ian Davidson in 2010 for possessing the toxin ricin – enough to kill nine people – had led that group to collapse without recourse to its proscription.[61] Indeed, even without the ban, which forced NA activists to start from scratch organizationally, legal action had already degraded its broader activist base. Throughout 2017, an almost monthly parade of activists began appearing before the courts, charged with numerous offences. These prosecutions also highlighted the range of legal remedies already available to the authorities in dealing with NA activity, particularly concerning inciting racial hatred or glorifying terrorism, beyond the exceptional measure of banning the organization itself.

Whilst these prosecutions affected NA adversely, they had less impact upon the wider extreme right-wing 'street' scene, which, having already lost momentum, was virtually moribund following a National Front demonstration in Dover in January 2016, which had ended amidst large-scale violent disorder. Police arrested eighty activists from a variety of groups in the days and months after the demonstration. Many received significant jail sentences, which also removed a number of key individuals from the milieu.[62] The repercussions of this event arguably had a greater deadening effect upon street activism than the NA ban.[63]

In the spring of 2017, police arrested the West Midlands NA leader Alex Deakin as part of an investigation into an incident the previous summer in which NA activists had plastered Aston University with 'White Zone' stickers. Police seized Deakin's phone thereby gaining access to the secret NA Telegram chat group and its incriminating messages. Deakin's self-confessed 'sloppiness' led to three separate though interlocking trials of NA activists for a range of offences, including membership of a proscribed group. Beginning in the autumn of 2017, police arrested over two dozen alleged NA activists. The first arrests took place on 5 September and involved four serving soldiers and a civilian employee who had participated in the Telegram group. Three of them later appeared in court. Lance Corporal Mikko Vehvilainen, a Christian Identity adherent obsessed with 'race war' and civilizational collapse, who had served in Afghanistan, received an eight-year sentence for NA membership. Deakin, convicted of two counts of possessing documents useful to someone preparing an act of terrorism and disseminating another ('Ethnic Cleansing Operations' which he emailed to Raymond and other NA contacts), also received eight years. The jury acquitted the third defendant, another serving soldier, though the Army subsequently discharged him.[64]

On 27 September, a further 11 activists were arrested, six of whom were subsequently charged with membership of a banned organization. Information from Hope Not Hate, the anti-fascist campaign group, who had an informant inside Lythgoe's North West NA group, reinforced the case, the group having already publicly highlighted that NA were using a converted warehouse in Warrington, Cheshire, to continue their activities in contravention of the ban.[65]

Police subsequently charged Jack Renshaw, a former YBNP activist, with conspiring to murder Labour MP Rosie Cooper with a machete and threatening to kill a police officer who had been investigating him for alleged child sex offences and inciting racial hatred. After he had killed the police officer, Renshaw's act of 'White Jihad' would have culminated in his wearing a fake suicide vest and committing 'suicide by cop' having made a martyrdom video stating he had committed the act on behalf of NA, the prosecution alleged. [66] Renshaw pled guilty to the terrorism charges on the first day of his trial. However, he denied seeking permission to kill Cooper on behalf of NA from Lythgoe, who was also on trial, claiming that the plot 'was on behalf of myself' and not NA which he also denied membership of. [67] Lythgoe was subsequently jailed for eight years but was found not guilty of encouraging Renshaw. The jury failed to reach a verdict regarding Renshaw's NA 'membership'. Following these verdicts reporting restrictions were lifted on Renshaw's conviction on two counts of inciting racial hatred during a separate trial. [68]

On 28 September, the day after this second tranche of arrests, Scottish Dawn and NS131 were both banned under section 3(6)(a) of the Terrorism Act (2000), which permits a Home Secretary to specify certain names as being synonyms for a previously proscribed organization.[69] The NA Telegram group exposure facilitated a further six arrests on 3 January 2018. Three pled guilty to NA membership, whilst a jury convicted the remaining defendants, two men and a woman, following a trial. One of the defendants, Adam Thomas, whose stepfather had played in the 'white power' band, Skrewdriver, was also convicted of possessing a terrorism manual, contrary to section 58 of the Terrorism Act 2000.[70] Police made their twenty-fourth arrest in relation to NA on 23 February: a forty-six year old man charged with NA membership and sending malicious communications.[71] In September police made five further arrests relating to NA membership, bringing the total since the group's proscription to twenty-nine, though not all were ultimately charged with an offence.[72]

Attempting to determine the authorities' understanding of the threat currently posed by the extreme right in Britain without access to operational intelligence is a fools' errand. That said it is possible to piece together an anecdotal picture of the challenge from media statements, statistics, and reports. Following these arrests,

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Assistant Commissioner Mark Rowley, the National Police Chiefs' Council lead for Counter-Terrorism, warned in October 2017 that extreme right-wing groups were increasingly moving from protest to action, indicating perhaps the limited deterrent of the ban on some segments of the extreme right-wing movement. He also cited an increase in arrests of right-wing extremists under counter-terrorist legislation, though some of this increase was attributable to NA's proscription.[73] The following spring Rowley publicly announced that since March 2017 the police and security services had interdicted four right-wing inspired 'plots' at least two of which related directly to NA, which was a 'grave concern.'[74]

David Anderson QC, formerly the Independent Reviewer of Counter-Terrorist legislation, further highlighted the nature of the 'small but still deadly threat' posed by extreme right-wing terrorism. During the course of his independent assessment of MI5 and Police internal reviews following jihadist attacks in London and Manchester in March and June 2017, Anderson requested a police briefing on the recent frequency of extreme right attack-planning:

They pointed to instances of attack-planning over the 12 months to October 2017, including the construction of viable explosive devices and the acquisition of firearms, and told me that there were individuals who were assessed to have both the knowledge and the resources to carry out their desired activities. The known level of attack-planning was however very much lower from the XRW than from Islamists: by way of illustration, at the time of my detailed briefing on the XRW threat in summer 2017, there were two pending police operations into XRW attack-planning, both relatively small-scale. It was not possible to quantify the number of thwarted XRW terrorist attacks since October 2013, in part because of uncertainty as to whether a lone actor was actually planning an attack and, if so, whether it would have crossed the threshold from hate crime to terrorism.[75]

Despite such uncertainty, the possibility of lone actors crossing the threshold, from planning to action remains an ongoing concern, as attested to anecdotally by a BBC interview in December 2017 with Nick Daines, an intervention provider and mentor who had worked for the Prevent programme in Wales. 'I worked with a man in the Newport area that was acquiring operational manuals for paramilitary groups and was creating explosives and experimenting with those in a quarry,' Daines told the BBC. 'He was very racially motivated and held a perception there was a coming race war and needed to prepare for that kind of eventuality.' Incidents involving the preparation of explosives or weaponry by extreme right-wing activists are 'not as rare as you would think,' Daines concluded.[76]

System Resistance Network

Despite the outlawing of NA and its successors, and the resulting arrests and prosecutions of activists for attempting to resurrect the group, another cluster of activists remained committed to perpetuating NA's political goals. They styled themselves as the System Resistance Network (SRN), proclaiming that 'White Revolution is the only solution' – a slogan recycled from Tom Metzger's White Aryan Resistance. Flaunting its defiance, the SRN declared 'The National Socialist never capitulates. He will never negotiate away his freedom. He will never compromise his ideals. We are revolutionary National Socialists united by struggle: the struggle against the System.' [77] Hope Not Hate estimated that around 30 former NA, NS131 or Scottish Dawn activists were assisting the individual running the SRN website. 'They're trying to antagonise the State,' noted a spokesperson. [78]

To date, physical SRN activity has been limited, exposing a gap between rhetoric and reality. Its' immediate antecedent was a short-lived 'Vanguard Britannia' group, formed in June 2017 in emulation of Vanguard America, a group that achieved notoriety after one of its members, James A. Fields Jr., murdered a female counter-demonstrator, Heather Heyer, at the 'Unite the Right' white supremacist demonstration in Charlottesville, Virginia. Its provocative name aside, the group did little more than put up stickers and posters in the Scottish town of Arbroath.[79] After two months, the group ditched the name, rebranding as SRN. Its first recorded

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action came in August 2017 when activists plastered homophobic posters and stickers around Southampton ahead of a gay pride event in the city.[80] Aesthetically, SRN is reminiscent of NA, its website even recycling older NA graphics. SRN posters affixed in Cardiff bore the slogan 'Death to Traitors' – the name Thomas Mair gave when asked for his particulars in court. Reports of similar activity in Dundee and Cambridge have also appeared whilst the group itself has issued videos instructing viewers to 'Join Your Local Nazis'.[81]

Notably, SRN drew ideological succor from James Mason, a veteran US national socialist who blended Nazism and occultism together with adulation of the cult leader Charles Manson whom he portrayed as an avatar for national socialist revolution. Though limited in its wider appeal, Manson's apocalyptic messianism, lurid race war fantasies, and 'anti-system' rhetoric gained a modicum of traction amongst the more cultic elements of the milieu.[82] Whilst these ideas were novel within a British context, their circulation attested to the transnational influence upon SRN of Atomwaffen (AW), a violent US *groupuscule* whose activists have killed five people. This influence derived from NA networks: Raymond had cultivated a relationship with the original AW leader, Brandon Russell, through the IronMarch forum. Russell had visited him in London in the summer of 2015.[83]

AW had assiduously cultivated Mason, resurrecting his career after several decades in obscurity, interviewing him on their website, and producing a new edition of his seminal book, *Siege*, which 'stridently promotes terrorism.'[84] SRN propaganda reflected Mason's influence. One video, uploaded on 18 February 2018, opened with a quote from *Siege* before declaring: 'We are not interested in creating a mass movement or an online group centred around discussion. Appealing to the masses results in compromising of beliefs and a waste of resources. Our way is the way of action.'[85] Commenting upon this evolving trajectory one anti-fascist source observed 'We no longer believe that they are neo-Nazis, although they are certainly still racists. We believe that they are nihilists, partly because they are so obsessed by terror and the secrecy of terror.'[86]

The permeation of Mason's brand of occult National Socialism into the lexicon of their British counterparts was evident, both visually and rhetorically, in SRN propaganda, which increasingly articulated a political eschatology that conceptualized the group as being engaged in a form of cosmic struggle:

The Racial Holy War is inevitable. Through the Racial Holy War, the Last Battalion consisting of Charles Manson, George Lincoln Rockwell and other Aryan heroes, and the New Reich shall return to Earth and establish the Organic State through the chaos, achieving Endsieg and Total Aryan Victory. Kalki shall bring us out of the Kali Yuga and into the Satya Yuga, and all race traitors and race defilers shall be burned in Holy Fire under Kalki's wrathful gaze.87

Following reports that former NA leader Alex Davies was a leading SRN figure in late February 2018 (something he denied), the group purged its website of content. [88] A holding page currently proclaims 'Coming Soon – A New Dawn' together with three words 'Radical – Fanatical – Ascetical.' It also stated 'Universal Order shall always prevail,' a conscious reference to Mason's previous organization. How SRN might develop in the future is unknown though at present it appears moribund. Mason had broadcast his personal support for the group in March 2018, [89] but shortly thereafter SRN abruptly terminated its support for AW. A video entitled 'Splitting the Atom' featured SRN activists burning the AW flag whilst simultaneously announcing the expulsion of their own leader for promoting 'Satanism' and hallucinogenic drug use, amongst other things. [90] AW responded that 'Our support [for SRN] was cut off the instant the leader was dispatched from everything he built.' [91] A new group has since emerged from this milieu, Sonnenkrieg Division, which also drew inspiration from AW. Three of its activists were arrested on terror charges in December 2018. [92]

Problems Enforcing the Ban

Proscribing NA and prosecuting those who remained active in defiance of the ban has proven markedly effective in physically degrading and dismantling the group, despite small-scale efforts by a minority of activists to carry on. In this instance, NA's proscription appears to have been more effective than similar prohibitions aimed at

Irish Republican and Islamist groups like AM. Whilst NA leaders initially sought to mimic AM, their efforts met with much less success, appearing amateurish by comparison. Whilst extreme Islamist groups inspired NA to call for a 'White Jihad', there is also a broader parallel regarding the role such groups have fulfilled as hubs for militant activism following their proscription. Approximately eighteen percent or one fifth of all terror-related arrests in Britain during the course of the last decade had some form of association with AM.[93] Similarly, the NA connection was principally responsible for the 2017-2018 spike in extreme right terror-related arrests.[94]

Where the ban was less successful was in its achieving its broader aim of undermining the NA 'brand,' particularly in relation to its on-line propaganda. This has proven an uphill struggle for the authorities. Although the ban removed the NA website, its YouTube channel and main Twitter feeds,[95] several of its subsidiary blogs, hosted by WordPress, remain online. Scottish Dawn's website remained online until February 2018. The NS131 website remains online (as of November 2018).

British police have the power to issue a notice to remove terrorist material, if hosted in the United Kingdom, under provisions in section 3 of the Terrorism Act (2006). Since servers outside the country host most illegal material, however, the Metropolitan Police Counter-Terrorism Internet Referral Unit instead pursues voluntary agreements with over 300 Communication Service Providers, working alongside them to help them enforce their own terms and conditions. This cooperation led to the removal of over 300,000 pieces of terrorist-related material from the internet between February 2010 and December 2017.[96] This includes NA material.[97]

Reliance upon the diligence of social media conglomerates themselves to evaluate and regulate such content, or indeed even to enforce their own terms and conditions, has proved particularly testing for the authorities. The House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, chaired by Yvette Cooper, MP, voiced its exasperation in its report on online hate crime in April 2017, recommending that the government hold social media companies more directly accountable for removing extremist and terrorist propaganda from their platforms. In particular, the report highlighted:

The weakness and delays in Google's response to our reports of illegal neo-Nazi propaganda on YouTube were dreadful. Despite us consistently reporting the presence of videos promoting National Action, a proscribed far-right group, examples of this material can still be found simply by searching for the name of that organisation. So too can similar videos with different names. As well as probably being illegal, we regard it as completely irresponsible and indefensible.

The Home Affairs Committee also pondered why these companies were capable of quickly removing material that breached copyright but did not employ the same technologies to prevent the sharing and reposting of illegal material. In light of this failure to take 'reasonable steps' to remove illegal material, the Committee recommended that government should now assess 'how the law and enforcement mechanisms should be strengthened in this area.' [98]

Despite such scathing criticism, by the end of the year the situation had not improved. When the Home Affairs Committee reconvened on 19 December, on the eve of the one-year anniversary of NA's proscription, to hear testimony from social media companies, Cooper vented her frustration:

The last time we heard evidence from YouTube, one of the videos we put to YouTube was one from National Action, a banned organisation, banned by March of last year. It was a National Action propaganda video that we put to YouTube, which you and your colleagues accepted should be removed and took down. However, within a month, I found it again on YouTube. Several more months, I found it again and each time raised it with YouTube. It was just simply being posted on different channels. I raised it eventually with the chief executive of YouTube and then still found it again a month later on YouTube. I finally raised it with Kent Walker, the senior vice president of Google, this autumn and finally – your staff will probably be relieved to hear – I cannot currently find it on YouTube. However, that process took about eight months, with me as the Chair of the Select Committee raising it with the most senior people in your organisation, before YouTube managed to use the most basic technology

that you use for your copyright issues all of the time to remove a banned video. Why did it take that much effort and that long just to get one video removed?[99]

Although YouTube had finally removed the offending video, it remained available on Twitter and Facebook, Cooper added. Although social media corporations had hailed the establishment of the Global Internet Forum to Counter Terrorism (GIFCT) as a means for pooling information regarding terrorism and extremism, Cooper was unimpressed. She highlighted the system's self-evident limitations if NA propaganda, removed by Google and YouTube, remained available on Facebook and Twitter. Either Google had not shared the information, 'or, if it has, the system isn't working to find it,' she stated. Conceding that the GIFCT 'hash database' which was used to share violent extremist and terrorist images and videos amongst members contained 'only' ISIS and al-Qaeda material, Simon Milner, the Director of Public Policy for Facebook, pondered the potential reasons why NA propaganda had not been removed. His answers drew a caustic response from Cooper who deemed it 'incomprehensible' that social companies were not sharing information concerning other forms of violent extremism. She concluded that, given the ease with which they were able to find NA content, 'It is hard for us to trust that you are doing this properly if we find all of these examples where it is clear that you are not.'[100]

Removing violent extremist content does not necessarily solve the problem, however. In theory, those searching for such material must now actively seek it out, rather than passively stumbling across whilst searching for something else. The problem, which Cooper also alighted upon, was that because Google's own algorithms continued to actively recommend racist content to people's timelines, based on their search terms, they 'are actually doing that grooming and radicalisation' for extremist groups, thereby undermining the Government's own counter-terrorist strategies.[101] Google was at pains to refute the charge. To prevent people ending up in a 'bubble of hate' they highlighted their work to identify such content using machine learning techniques which could limit recommendations and also comment facilities on such material.[102]

Days before appearing in front of the Committee, YouTube had proclaimed that these machine-learning algorithms accounted for ninety-eight percent of the 150,000 videos removed from its platforms since June 2017. Furthermore, they stated, such advances enabled them to take down nearly seventy percent of content within eight hours of upload and nearly half of it within two hours, 'and we continue to accelerate that speed.'[103] Further pressure was applied to such companies on 1 March 2018 when the European Commission recommended a set of operational measures noting that because terrorist content was most harmful in the first few hours of its appearance, when it was most rapidly disseminated, it should be removed within 'one hour' of it being flagged to such platforms by law enforcement.[104]

This only served to underscore the reality of the government's struggle to counteract NA online, however. On 7 March 2018, Cooper finally lost patience with Google's unsatisfactory responses, writing publicly to its Vice-President of Public Policy, Nicklas Berild Lundblad, that, despite raising the issue publicly and privately with Google executives 'at least seven times' between March 2017 and December 2017, NA material remained freely and easily accessible on its platforms. 'It shows either hopeless incompetence or a shameful abdication of responsibility,' she wrote.[105] Cooper subsequently stated 'If they are too arrogant to act on illegal material when they are warned repeatedly, it's time to bring in a system of strong fines as the committee recommended last year.'[106] Cooper raised the issue of Google's non-compliance in Parliament the following day and was informed it remained an option to have the social media giant found in contempt of Parliament if it failed to honour its own undertakings to the Home Affairs Select Committee, a warning that piled further pressure upon Google to resolve the issue.[107] The matter remains unresolved. Lundblad's subsequent response to these criticisms regarding the robustness of Google's review system, 'just isn't good enough,' Cooper declared on 6 June 2018.[108] Cooper's very public excoriation of Google aside, other voices have highlighted that that the removal of illegal content might also be enforced at other levels of the Internet.[109]

The authorities' failure to satisfactorily conclude the matter of NA's lingering digital footprint underscores the difficulty of combating such propaganda, despite it being one of the principal reasons the government banned the group in the first place. Furthermore, revelations about the limitations of the GIFC database, for instance, highlighted during testimony before the Home Affairs Committee, raises serious questions about

the extent to which social media businesses have taken seriously the threat posed by the lingering existence of militant extreme right propaganda located on their platforms compared to that posted by jihadist groups. Post-Charlottesville, however, the ongoing digital de-platforming of numerous individuals and initiatives indicates something a sea change in this regard.

Conclusion

A full assessment of the impact of the ban upon NA and its networks has to await the conclusion of several ongoing trials. We can, however, make several observations. The ban was undoubtedly successful in its primary aim of dismantling NA organizationally. It deterred a significant number of NA militants from further political activity, though some have since reappeared in less overtly extreme groups.[110] By the same token, the conviction of numerous activists for continued NA 'membership' from 2017 onwards, highlights that others, particularly in the West Midlands and the North West, remain committed to pursuing the group's original goals. That some NA activists would seek to defy the ban is unsurprising. Simply raising the legal stakes rarely deters activists from engaging in 'high risk' activism.[111] Those activists who chose to continue, albeit on a small scale, tested the legal limits of activism by forming continuity groups, explored new structural forms for organizing, and engaged in militant actions leading to their prosecution for a range of terrorism-related offences. Paradoxically, many of these arrests and convictions were obtained under pre-existing legislation, suggesting the clear possibility that alternatives to proscribing the group existed that would still have seriously disrupted and conceivably ended NA's activities without recourse to the exceptional measure of prohibiting the group itself.

Police have interdicted four terrorist 'plots' *since* the NA ban, two of which appear directly related to the group. The extent to which the ban might have precipitated further radicalization, which the authorities intended the ban to frustrate, or merely confirmed a pre-existing trajectory, remains unclear. Furthermore, the emergence of SRN indicates that the ideological worldview of some former NA activists has begun to mutate in the aftermath of the ban, moving in a more 'cultic' direction as their 'anti-system' narratives hardened. These activists frame the post-ban period as 'our time of struggle' against an 'occupation government' seeking to silence 'white dissidents'- or worse.[112] It is clear, however, that, broadly speaking, the ban, its subsequent enforcement, and the application of pre-existing legislation, have all combined to seriously diminish the milieu's capacity to mobilize. This observation aligns with the results of existing research *vis-à-vis* the banning of extreme right parties in Germany, a useful point of comparison for policy makers seeking to assess potential outcomes resulting from proscription.

Where the ban has been less successful, has been in its effort to undermine NA's 'brand' by preventing the dissemination of its 'poisonous propaganda' online. Whilst the ban succeeded in closing down the group's own digital platforms, to the evident frustration of the Home Affairs Select Committee, the long-term success of this counter-measure appears reliant more upon the capacity and willingness of social media companies to implement their own terms and conditions rather than the power of politicians to legislate the problem away.

About the Author: Graham Macklin is Assistant Professor/Postdoctoral Fellow at the Centre for Research on Extremism (C-REX), Faculty of Social Sciences, at the University of Oslo, Norway. He has published extensively on extreme right and anti-minority politics in Britain in both the inter-war and post-war periods, including: Very Deeply Dyed in the Black: Sir Oswald Mosley and the Resurrection of British Fascism after 1945 (2007) and, with Nigel Copsey, British National Party: Contemporary Perspectives (2011). Routledge will publish in 2019 his monograph Failed Fuhrers: A History of the British Extreme Right. He co-edits the 'Routledge Studies in Fascism and the Far Right' book series as well as the journals, Patterns of Prejudice and Fascism.

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