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From Bombs to Books, and Back Again? Mapping Strategies of Right-Wing Revolutionary Resistance

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ABSTRACT

This article begins by outlining four post-WWII strategies of right-wing revolutionary resistance: vanguardism; the cell system; leaderless resistance; and metapolitics. Next, the article argues that metapolitics became a preferred strategy for many right-wing revolutionaries during the 2000s and early 2010s, and proposes three conditions that may help explain this metapolitical turn: limited opportunities for armed resistance; a subcultural style shift; and new opportunities for promoting alternative worldviews online. Finally, the article theorizes about the types of threats that may emerge in the wake of this metapolitical turn, and speculates about the likelihood of a new and more violent turn in the near future.

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Imagine yourself as an ardent right-wing revolutionary living in a Western democracy today. How would you create revolutionary change? Would you establish a political party? Would you consider using terrorism? Or would you perhaps resort to the internet and social media? Operating as a right-wing revolutionary in a Western democracy is no easy task. State repression is high. External and financial support is low. And your ideas are stigmatized publicly. What can you do? This question is the starting point of this article, which sets out to explain why a strategic shift occurred in the revolutionary right movement during the 2000s and early 2010s, a shift away from armed resistance and toward trying to change how people think. This strategy is known inside the movement as *metapolitics*.

Following this metapolitical turn, the revolutionary right movement is currently positioned at a crossroads. While some members continue to believe in metapolitics and consider armed resistance as futile under the present circumstances, others are becoming increasingly anxious to go down a more violent path.

To better understand this situation, this article sheds light on some strategic dilemmas facing right-wing revolutionaries operating *inside* Western democracies. Most existing research on the strategic decision-making of militant or revolutionary movements is oriented toward actors operating inside weak or fragile states.¹ One key finding has been that armed resistance is most likely to occur – and succeed – in states that are neither fully democratic nor fully autocratic.² For a militant

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revolutionary operating in a Western democracy today, this finding has important implications. It suggests that means other than armed resistance should be seriously considered, at least for the time being. For Western democratic governments, the same finding provides a good reason for avoiding any democratic backsliding. However, it also suggests that governments should be wary of political activists who may be concealing their revolutionary and possibly violent ambitions for strategic reasons only.

By mapping and comparing different resistance strategies promoted by the revolutionary right in Western democracies after WWII, this article aims to explain why metapolitics became a preferred strategy for many right-wing revolutionaries during the 2000s and early 2010s. On the surface, metapolitics may come across as the non-violent alternative for the revolutionary right. However, underneath the surface lies an acceptance of and willingness to engage in armed struggle that is likely to come forth under the right (or wrong) conditions. To disclose the kinds of challenges this metapolitical strategy poses to Western democracies today, and tomorrow, we need to understand its underlying nature and logic, including why and how it gained traction, both in Western Europe where it originated and in the United States.

To do so, this article is organized into five parts. I begin by proposing “the revolutionary right” as a useful concept for analyzing a particular segment of the far-right universe, characterized by its deliberate and tenacious work toward a revolutionary outcome, i.e. fundamental societal change. Next, I present four revolutionary strategies promoted by the revolutionary right in post-WWII Western democracies: vanguardism; the cell system; leaderless resistance; and metapolitics. Third, combining quantitative and qualitative data, I substantiate the claim that a metapolitical turn did indeed take place within the revolutionary right during the 2000s and early 2010s. Fourth, I discuss three conditions that may help explain this metapolitical turn: (1) limited opportunities for armed resistance; (2) a subcultural style shift from violent skinheadism to bookish Identitarianism; and (3) new opportunities for promoting alternative worldviews online. Finally, I theorize about the types of threats that may emerge in the wake of this metapolitical turn, and speculate about the likelihood of a new and more violent turn in the near future.

My analysis relies on both qualitative and quantitative data. To identify and describe dominant strategies within the revolutionary right, I rely on an extensive collection of primary sources, such as manuals, magazines, audio and video recordings, books, and other types of movement propaganda, in which past and present ideological authorities discuss and compare different strategies. Notably, to promote transparency and replicability, all primary sources cited or referenced in this article have been uploaded to an online repository and can be accessed by other researchers.³ To document trends and behavioral changes within the movement, I rely on quantitative events data from existing datasets, such as the Terrorism in Western Europe: Event Data (TWEED) dataset, which documents right-wing terrorism in Western Europe 1950–2004;⁴ the Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence (RTV) dataset, which documents right-wing terrorism and violence in Western Europe 1990–2019;⁵ and the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB), which documents (fatal) right-wing violence in the United States 1990–2019.⁶

Conceptualizing the Revolutionary Right

The far right is a broad category including many different actors, ranging from political parties via militant groups to lone-actor terrorists. Common denominators for all far-right actors are anti-egalitarianism,⁷ authoritarian inclinations,⁸ and nativism, i.e. the idea that states should be inhabited exclusively by members of the native group.⁹ In contemporary research on extremism and democracy, members of the far-right universe are commonly divided into two sub-groups: radicals and extremists.¹⁰ While radicals accept democracy of some kind, just not the liberal version, extremists reject democracy and favor violent or other unconventional methods to promote their alternative worldview.¹¹ In this article, I adopt this conceptualization and add “the revolutionary right” as a sub-category of the extreme right, as illustrated by Figure 1.

Members of the revolutionary right belong to the extreme-right branch of the far-right family because they seek revolutionary change, i.e. to replace current democratic regimes with something else. Paying special attention to members of the revolutionary right is important, because they are the ones working tenaciously toward the actual dismantling of Western democratic regimes. They have dedicated themselves fully to this struggle and are spending their days and weeks pondering how such a revolutionary outcome could be achieved. But, as already stated, that is no easy task. Being a right-wing revolutionary in today’s Western democracies presents a number of difficulties and strategic dilemmas. To cope with these challenges, the revolutionary right has pursued different strategies, most of which revolve around four ideal types, to be outlined next.

Strategies of Revolutionary Resistance

As a right-wing revolutionary operating in a Western democracy, you need to consider several strategic questions. One question is whether you are going to operate publicly or clandestinely. If you decide to operate publicly, the potential for mass mobilization is higher, but, to avoid being banned or imprisoned, you have stay on the right side

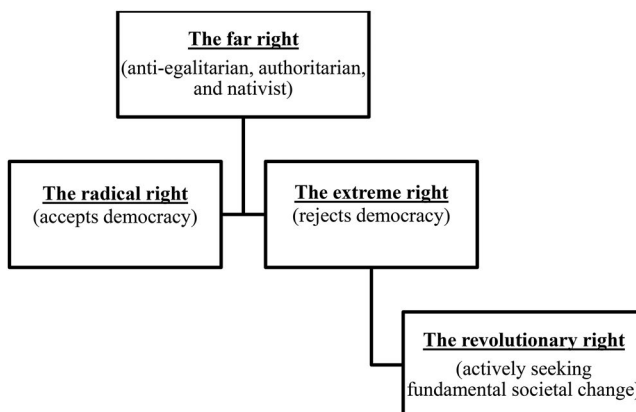


Figure 1. Conceptualizing the revolutionary right.

of the law. That means that terrorism and other forms of unlawful behavior are off the table. By contrast, if you decide to operate clandestinely, you may use illegal and spectacular methods, including terrorism, and thereby generate considerable attention for your cause. However, the potential for mass mobilization and public interaction is more limited.

A second question is whether you should develop a proper organization with a strong and centralized leadership, or go for a more loose organizational structure. Most revolutionary organizations include some form of centralized leadership. However, under certain conditions, a looser organizational structure can be necessary or even advantageous. It can be necessary if the level of state repression is so high, and resources and support so low, that maintaining a proper organization is simply impossible. In addition, it can be advantageous if the aim is wide, deep, long-term cultural influence, rather than imminent political change. By cultivating a wider multifold network of related groups, organizations, enterprises, brands, media platforms and ideological authorities, all working toward the same goal (revolutionary change), you may be able to gather a larger following, and influence more people, than if you put all your resources into one organization.

By cross-tabulating these two questions, we arrive at four strategies that the revolutionary right has been experimenting with since the end of WWII, as illustrated by Table 1. Note that these strategies represent ideal types, which are often combined and adjusted to local conditions in reality. In the following, I briefly outline the logic and post-WWII history of each of these four strategies.

Vanguardism

The central tenet of vanguardism is the idea of a hierarchically organized elite group – the vanguard or *avant-garde* – that will pave the way toward a revolutionary outcome by challenging dominant ideas and norms and thereby opening the eyes of the masses.¹² In a revolutionary context, the term was originally developed by the Marxist theoretician Karl Kautsky, before being popularized in Lenin’s theory of revolutionary struggle, most notably in one of his earlier works entitled *What Is to Be Done?* originally published in 1902.¹³

Lenin’s work has in turn inspired other revolutionary activists, both on the left and on the right. One example is Dominique Venner, a former militant of the *Organization armée secrète* and ideological authority within the contemporary revolutionary right. In a famous manifesto from 1964 entitled *Pour une critique positive* (For a positive critique), Venner called for the creation of a single revolutionary and nationalist organization, which would be “monolithic and hierarchical” and composed of young “disciplined and devoted” nationalist militants who would be ready for combat.¹⁴ Venner’s

Table 1. Strategies of revolutionary resistance.

		Openness	
		Clandestine	Public
Organization	Strong	Cell-system	Vanguardism
	Loose	Leaderless resistance	Metapolitics

call never truly materialized, and he later became a martyr within the movement after he committed suicide in a French cathedral in 2013, allegedly to trigger revolutionary actions, but likely also because he was suffering from a deadly disease.¹⁵

Another well-known revolutionary promoting vanguardism was the British white nationalist Colin Jordan who wrote a series of articles entitled "The Way Ahead - A Primer for the N-S Vanguard".¹⁶ Here, Jordan argues that democracy is incompatible with "the ideology of white survival" and that party politics and elections represented the "dead end road of failure". What was required were "specialist teams" of dedicated activists "with the necessary aptitude, knowledge and training to strike at the delicate and vulnerable workings of the present system, inflict serious damage contributory to its desired breakdown." It was only through the actions of such a "Vanguard" – conceived as "power through sabotage" – that democracy could be dismantled and "a new National Socialist Order might rise again."¹⁷

Vanguardism represents perhaps the most conventional strategy for revolutionary resistance. Vanguard groups' use of violent methods depends largely on the permissiveness of their operating environment. For example, during the 1960s and 1970s, relatively large vanguard groups with several hundred active militants frequently used violent methods in Western Europe, including *Ordine Nuovo* in Italy¹⁸ and *Wehrsporgruppe Hoffmann* in Germany.¹⁹

A common denominator for groups such as these is that they have access to considerable financial and military resources, and receive external support from members of the political elites. For instance, activists from *Ordine Nuovo* received support from members of Italy's secret service and police to carry out terrorist attacks masked as left-wing terrorism, in order to weaken support for the Italian Communist Party.²⁰ However, as the Cold War ended, the legacies of former authoritarian regimes evaporated, and Western democracies consolidated, the political landscape in Western Europe no longer permitted the existence of such large and well-organized vanguard groups, using violence to further their cause.²¹ In the United States, the situation was, and still is, somewhat different because its unique gun laws and lack of hate speech legislation permit heavily armed groups openly promoting anti-government and white nationalist views. However, from the 1980s onwards, white nationalist groups pursuing terrorism, such as *The Order* and *The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord* have been dismantled by the authorities.²² Consequently, violent right-wing revolutionaries had to either moderate their methods or organize differently.

This change of operating environment triggered the development of new concepts and organizational models designed to continue the armed resistance underground. However, it did not mean a definitive abandonment of vanguardism. Some groups with a clear revolutionary agenda continued operating publicly with hierarchical structures. However, as a result, they had to moderate their methods. Perhaps the most prominent example was the *National Alliance* in the United States, founded by William Luther Pierce in 1974.²³ As armed revolution has become an increasingly difficult idea to promote publicly, these types of organization have engaged in a challenging balancing act. On the one hand, they continue to push their revolutionary ideas and prepare for a final and potentially violent "take-over" of the government, once the time is ripe and the people are ready. On the other hand, they must be careful not to break any laws, in order to continue operating in the public sphere.

An inherent part of this operational double-dealing is a rather ambiguous attitude toward violent attacks committed by other right-wing activists. Typically, groups such as the *National Alliance* would emphasize the nonviolent nature of their own organization, while at the same time expressing understanding of or respect for other activists' decisions to carry out violent attacks. This was exemplified when *The Order* – a small terrorist group also known as the *Silent Brotherhood* or *Bruder Schweigen*, inspired by Pierce's violence-enticing novel *The Turner Diaries* – engaged in a violent campaign involving the murder of a Jewish radio host. The campaign ended with a dramatic shoot-out between the police and *The Order's* leader Robert Jay Mathews, who was killed and subsequently gained martyr status within the movement. Although Pierce believed this terrorist campaign was premature, he publicly supported Mathews's view that "Whites were not involved in an ideological debate, but in a war."²⁴

A more recent example can be found in the Nordic countries, where the national socialist group the *Nordic Resistance Movement* (NRM) has grown slowly but surely since it was established in Sweden in 1997. Since then, sister divisions have been established in Finland, Norway, and Denmark, and today the organization consists of several hundred activists in total. NRM is built using a conventional hierarchical structure with a centralized leadership and in each country is divided into several local units called "nests" (inspired by the Romanian Iron Guard), which are also hierarchically organized.²⁵ Just as the *National Alliance* did, the NRM is preparing for The Day when they will seize power using every means necessary. Meanwhile, the organization operates provocatively but safely within legally gray areas and engages in various forms of propaganda activities, while claiming to use violence only in self-defense. However, on several occasions, NRM affiliates or former activists have been involved in severe violent episodes, including knife stabbings and bombings. In such cases, the standard response from the NRM leadership is that they do not themselves engage in violent activities, but understand why others might choose to do so.²⁶

In retrospect, no vanguard organization has managed to replace a functioning liberal democratic regime with a far-right authoritarian regime after WWII.²⁷ Either they have had to give up their revolutionary ambitions in order to move into the political party domain or they have kept their revolutionary ambitions intact but have not managed to generate sufficient popular support. As such, the model has failed. Yet it is noteworthy how a group such as the NRM has managed to consolidate and dominate an otherwise fractious extreme-right movement, notwithstanding its controversial old-school national socialist ideology. The formula of maintaining a strong public hierarchical organization operating on the right side of the law, while indirectly supporting clandestine armed resistance, comes across as a particularly difficult challenge for policymakers and practitioners alike.²⁸

The Cell System

The central tenet of the cell system is the idea of a clandestine network of semi-autonomous cells, controlled by a centralized leadership and used to generate a revolutionary outcome by resorting to illegal and possibly spectacular methods such as terrorism.²⁹ The system is characterized by multiple cells, operating independently

of each other in order to uphold operational security. This strategy is particularly relevant when the operating environment is perceived as being too hostile for the maintenance of a vanguard organization. In other words, the cell system is devised to operate clandestinely to survive severe state repression and surveillance. Because each cell operates independently of the others, the system is harder for the authorities to crack down on. The weakest link is obviously the centralized leadership, upon which the entire system relies. Therefore, the central leadership of most resistance movements with cell-like structures is based in safe havens outside the main operating area, usually in another country. Perhaps the best-known example is the *al-Qaeda* of the 1990s and early 2000s, although one may question how much control its central leadership actually had over its various branches and cells.³⁰

Unlike militant jihadists, the revolutionary right has had few safe havens or conflict zones to operate from.³¹ Consequently, the cell system has never really been implemented in its purest form. The U.S.-group known as *The Base* is perhaps the closest contemporary example of a wholehearted attempt to establish a cell system. Notably, its leader was based in Russia, which has served as one of the few potential safe havens for right-wing revolutionaries. However, just like most other right-wing groups trying to organize offline while promoting terrorism online, cells established by *The Base* in the United States were effectively rounded up by law enforcement shortly after the organization became publicly known.³²

Another recent example that certainly mimicked the cell system was a group called *Feuerkrieg Division*, which subscribed to the so-called SIEGE-subculture (more on this below) and allegedly had operative cells in a number of European countries as well as in the United States and Brazil. However, *Feuerkrieg Division* was first and foremost an online network, with no real resources or capacities, and it turned out that the network was being led by a 13-year-old schoolboy living with his parents in Estonia.³³

These examples testify to the difficulties of building and maintaining a cell system today. Louis Beam, an influential ideological authority from the United States, arrived at the same conclusion several decades ago when discussing the potential of a cell system in a famous essay from 1992. Drawing on the experiences of early separatist groups from the American Revolution as well as Russian communist cells operating in the United States during the Cold War, Beam argued that the cell system had already proven to be an effective way of organizing a revolutionary movement in a hostile environment. In fact, during his involvement with the *Ku Klux Klan* during the late 1980s and early 1990s, Beam tried to restructure the *Ku Klux Klan* into a cell-like system.³⁴ However, his attempt failed, which may have led him to the following conclusion:³⁵

The efficient and effective operation of a cell system after the Communist model, is, of course, dependent upon central direction, which means impressive organization, funding from the top, and outside support, all of which the Communists had. Obviously, American patriots have none of these things at the top or anywhere else, and so an effective cell organization based upon the Soviet system of operation is impossible.

Consequently, Beam proposed another strategy as a more viable option for contemporary revolutionaries: leaderless resistance.

Leaderless Resistance

The central tenet of leaderless resistance is the idea of an unorganized and decentralized resistance movement that cannot be efficiently suppressed or targeted by the government.³⁶ Having experienced and realized the difficulties of implementing a cell system in the United States, Beam proposed the strategy of leaderless resistance as an alternative, requiring nothing but a shared philosophy and individual dedication.³⁷ The idea is simple: When organized resistance is impossible, unorganized resistance is better than no resistance. As such, leaderless resistance can be seen as a last resort or minimal solution, testifying to the difficulty of being a right-wing revolutionary in a Western democracy today. It is a desperate call for dedicated activists to take matters into their own hands. However, it is also an intelligence nightmare. In the following quote, Beam discusses the advantages of the strategy of leaderless resistance vis-à-vis vanguardism:³⁸

The Federals, able to amass overwhelming strength of numbers, manpower, resources, intelligence gathering, and capability at any given time, need only a focal point to direct their anger (ie Waco). A single penetration of a pyramid style [i.e. vanguard] organization can lead to the destruction of the whole. Whereas, Leaderless Resistance presents no single opportunity for the Federals to destroy a significant portion of the Resistance.

Although Beam's proposed strategy of leaderless resistance never achieved its stated objective – defeating the United States government – its core idea has certainly inspired a number of individuals and autonomous cells, who have prepared and/or carried out terrorist attacks both in the United States and in other Western democracies. Some of the best-known cases include Timothy McVeigh in the United States, David Copeland in the United Kingdom, the *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* in Germany, Anders Behring Breivik in Norway, and Brenton Tarrant in New Zealand. In fact, if we isolate the most terrorist-like events included in the RTV dataset, i.e. premeditated attacks using firearms or explosives, we can see that lone actors are responsible for a large majority of the attacks, as illustrated by Figure 2:

However, whether these attacks have actually brought the movement any closer to a revolutionary outcome is another question entirely. As such, the strategy of leaderless resistance has not been uncontested by influential ideological authorities within the revolutionary right. For example, in the winter issue of *Resistance Magazine* from 2000, Steven Barry³⁹ (using the pseudonym Eric Hollyoak) offered a thought-provoking critique of the concept.⁴⁰ Perhaps not so strange, considering that *Resistance Magazine* was owned by the *National Alliance* – one of the few organizations that had clung on to the vanguard model.

Another skeptic was the Norwegian strategist Eric Blücher, who wrote several tactical manuals for *Blood and Honor Scandinavia* and *Combat 18* in the United Kingdom under the pseudonym Max Hammer. In one of these field manuals, Blücher discusses the pros and cons of leaderless resistance. He concludes:⁴¹

In some countries Leaderless Resistance is highly recommendable. (...) In Scandinavia – especially Sweden and Denmark – there now exist well-organized NS movements which actually know the score. They are prepared to work legally if “democracy” lets them. But they are also willing to change their *modus operandi* if that should become necessary. Unity does mean strength, and a well-organized movement of strong individuals multiplies

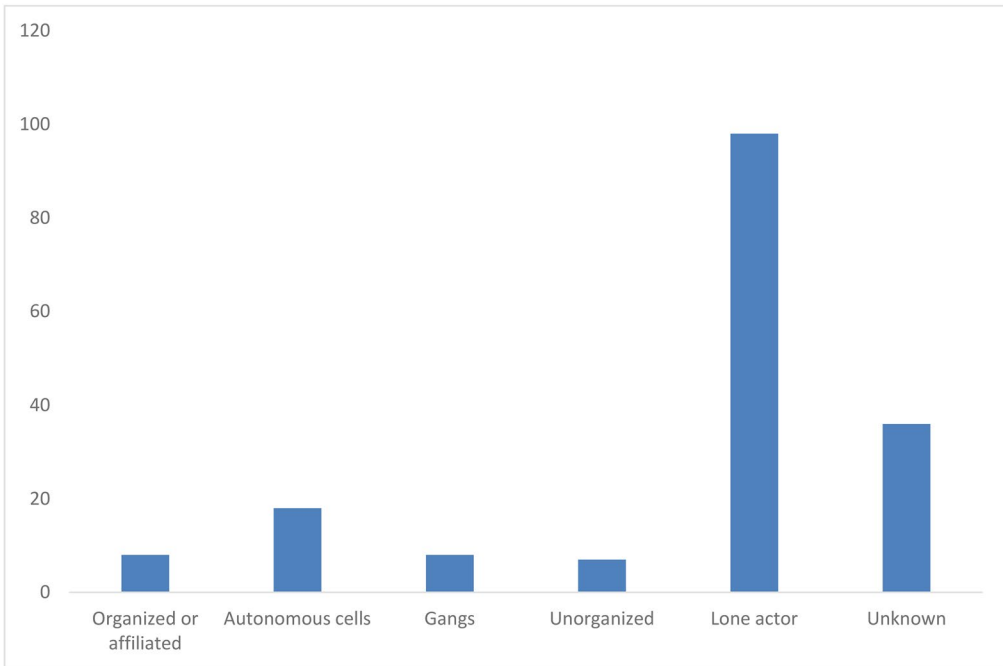


Figure 2. Premediated right-wing attacks using firearms or explosives in Western Europe 1990–2019 ($N=175$). Source: The RTV dataset.

that strength by its number of members. On the other hand, some comrades work best on their own, and their actions are of such a nature that total anonymity is needed and no organization can take responsibility without forever leaving their legal status. (...) These lone white wolves must be respected and left alone to stalk the worst enemies of our race. They expect no support and assistance but they deserve acknowledgement and understanding.

On the one hand, the mere existence of leaderless resistance may be seen as a victory for Western governments, because it indicates that more organized forms of armed resistance have been successfully defeated. On the other hand, leaderless resistance does indeed represent a “wicked problem,” because it is very hard to counter using conventional intelligence and counterterrorism measures. However, to truly pose a threat to the system through a concerted terrorist campaign, one that generates widespread public fear by carrying out repeated attacks against similar targets, leaderless resistance fighters need direction from ideological authorities concerning targeting, timing, and methods. However, such ideological authorities were becoming fewer and further between during the 2000s and early 2010s. At the same time, an increasing number of ideological authorities started promoting a far less violent but possibly more realistic strategy: metapolitics.

Metapolitics

The central tenet of metapolitics is the idea of influencing cultural, intellectual, and public domains as a way of preparing for the final revolutionary stage.⁴² Such an endeavor is ideally implemented by a loosely organized yet interwoven web of different

organizations, groups, labels, enterprises and ideological authorities, all working toward the same overarching aim: revolution via cultural hegemony. The strategy is heavily inspired by the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, in particular his essay series entitled *The Prison Notebooks*, which he wrote while being imprisoned by the Italian Fascist regime in 1926.⁴³ In these essays, Gramsci highlights the importance of cultural hegemony as a way of maintaining the present system, and thereby also as a way in to changing it through cultural – or metapolitical – struggle. As such, the core premise of metapolitics is that political ideas must be anchored in cultural, intellectual, and public domains, before actual revolutionary change can materialize. It is thus a broad and deep strategy, emphasizing a conglomerate of different channels of influence and forms of activism within the extra-parliamentary space.

Besides Gramsci, the revolutionary right's adoption of a metapolitical strategy draws heavily on the 1960s French *Nouvelle Droite* (New Right) movement. A key source for this intellectual current is a think tank called *Groupe de recherche et d'études pour la civilisation européenne* (GRECE - Research and Study Group for European Civilization), established in 1968. GRECE represents, in the words of an influential publisher, "an effort to revive and redefine certain political and cultural ideas which had been discredited since 1945."⁴⁴ In particular, this New Right initiative can be seen as a reaction to *modernity*, understood as the following five converging processes:

Individualization, through the destruction of old forms of communal life; *massification*, through the adoption of standardised behaviour and lifestyles; *desacralisation*, through the displacement of the great religious narratives by a scientific interpretation of the world; *rationalisation*, through the domination of instrumental reason, the free market, and technical efficiency; and *universalism*, through a planetary extension of a model of society postulated implicitly as the only rational possibility and thus as superior.⁴⁵

According to New Right thinkers, these converging processes are fueled by the dominant ideology of *liberalism* and lead to a dilution of collective identities and individual feelings of emptiness, anomie, and nihilism. The aim of the new-right community is to reverse these processes and stake out a radically new course through metapolitical activism.

Simply put, metapolitical activists have replaced bombs with books. In addition, they have recently specialized in carrying out spectacular media-stunts to promote their ideas to an increasingly larger audience. Some groups, such as *Generation Identity*, also bring these new-right ideas and strategies into the streets, thereby fusing metapolitical discourse with more confrontational forms of street activism, including house occupations, street patrols, and even maritime border patrols.⁴⁶

This metapolitical turn of the revolutionary right has united activists from different corners of the world, who otherwise might not have spoken together. For example, while ideas relating to race are usually rejected by the European New Right, they still organize gatherings and conferences with members of the Alt-Right movement in the United States, whose racism is of a much more blatant character.⁴⁷ Despite such ideological differences, these actors seem to consider each other as kindred spirits, most likely because they have chosen a similar *modus operandi*, emphasizing propaganda and debate over violent action, public appearance over clandestine organization, and an amorphous leaderless network meant to influence multiple domains simultaneously

instead of a hierarchical movement oriented toward subversive actions or a governmental take-over. This is the self-styled *new right*.⁴⁸ It has chosen a different and mostly nonviolent path. However, this does not change the fact that it is an inherently anti-egalitarian, illiberal movement that considers migrants and immigrants as unwanted foreign objects harming the nature and spirit of Western (white) civilization.

Documenting the Metapolitical Turn of the Revolutionary Right

A key premise of this article is the claim that a metapolitical turn did indeed take place among the organized elements of the revolutionary right during the 2000s and early 2010s. How can this turn be documented empirically? This section looks at two indicators that may be used to document this strategic shift: (1) a substantial decrease in terrorism and political violence committed by organized right-wing groups; and (2) promotion of metapolitical ideas by contemporary ideological authorities.

Less Organized Terrorism

One way of testing the claim about a metapolitical turn is to investigate the levels of political violence and terrorism orchestrated by revolutionary right groups. If levels of organized right-wing terrorism have been decreasing over time, this could suggest that a metapolitical turn has taken place. By contrast, if levels of organized terrorism and violence remain stable or increase, violent strategies may remain the preferred alternative for many revolutionary activists. In Western Europe, the TWEED and RTV datasets can be used to investigate patterns of right-wing terrorism and violence between 1950 and 2019, while in the United States the Extremist Crime Database (ECDB) provides similar data from 1990 onwards.⁴⁹

The TWEED dataset covers terrorism in Western Europe between 1950 and 2004, including 648 attacks coded as right-wing terrorism. These data show that more than 60 percent of all right-wing attacks were carried out by *known* groups, and that most of these groups operated in France, Italy, Spain, and Germany between the 1960s and the 1980s. Furthermore, as much as 39 percent of the 648 right-wing attacks registered in TWEED and 56 percent of all killings were caused by only four terrorist groups: *Organisation Armée Secrete* in France; *Ordine Nero* (a continuation of *Ordine Nuovo*) and *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* in Italy; and *Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann* in Germany. A closer look at these groups shows that they had up to several hundred militants and were organized hierarchically with a centralized leadership. In other words, they were prototypical vanguard organizations. Their terrorist campaigns were motivated by international conflicts rather than by immigration, which had yet to become a contested issue in Western Europe. More specifically, their campaigns were products of elite-sponsored strategies meant to protect or reinstall former authoritarian regimes, and to obstruct their communist enemies from gaining political power.⁵⁰

The end of the Cold War and the dismantling of authoritarian regimes in Western Europe changed the strategic context for the European revolutionary right. This change of operating environment influenced the motives, target selection, and mobilization opportunities of today's activists. As a result, elite-sponsored vanguard organizations

involved in large-scale terrorist campaigns were replaced by more loosely organized subcultural networks, groups, and individuals, whose violence and target selection were of a less terroristic nature.⁵¹ This shift in strategic context can also be observed in the TWEED data, as most attacks by known groups occurred before the 1990s, while most attacks by *unknown* perpetrators occurred during the early 1990s (see [Figure 3](#)).

This tendency is further supported by evidence from the RTV dataset, which shows that organized groups *and* their affiliates were involved in only 13 of the 208 fatal events registered between 1990 and 2019 (see [Figure 4](#)).

Research in the United States similarly shows declining levels of right-wing terrorism and violence committed by members of formal groups, as illustrated by [Figure 5](#).⁵²

In sum, these data indicate that organized armed resistance from the revolutionary right has become increasingly rare in Western democracies, while the number of attacks committed by lone actors has remained surprisingly stable, although with a slight increase between 2015 and 2019. These patterns support the notion that organized armed resistance by way of vanguard groups or cell systems has become a less realistic option for right-wing revolutionaries, who must therefore resort to either metapolitics, or leaderless resistance.

Ideological Authorities

A second indicator that a metapolitical turn occurred during the 2000s and early 2010s is the promotion of metapolitical ideas, as opposed to violent methods, by prominent

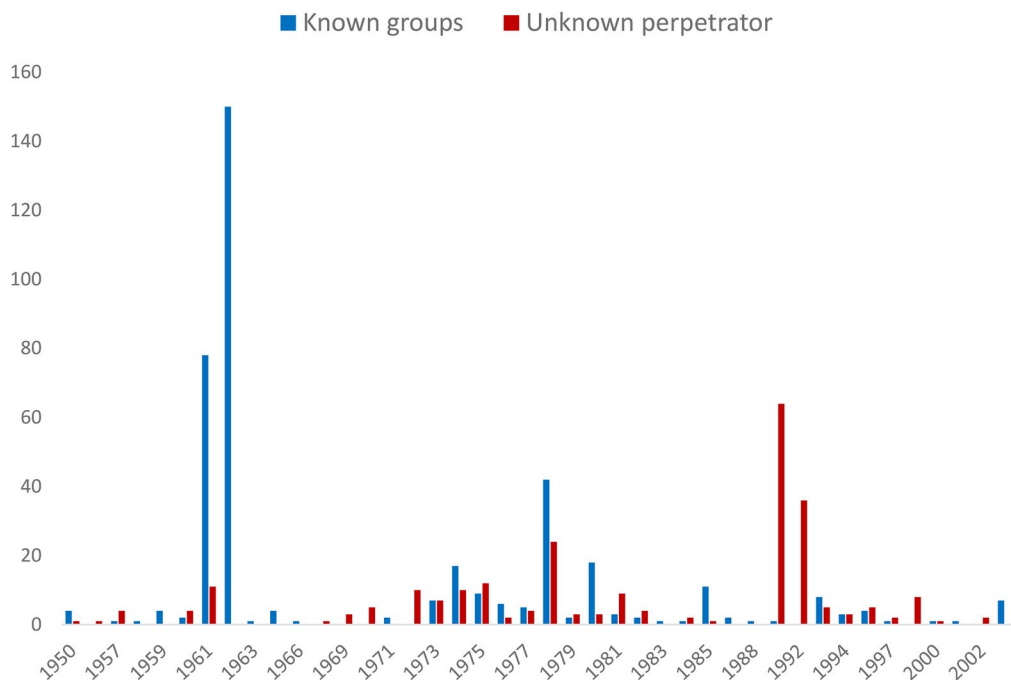


Figure 3. Right-wing terrorism in Western Europe 1950–2004, known groups versus unknown perpetrators ($N=648$). Source: the TWEED dataset.

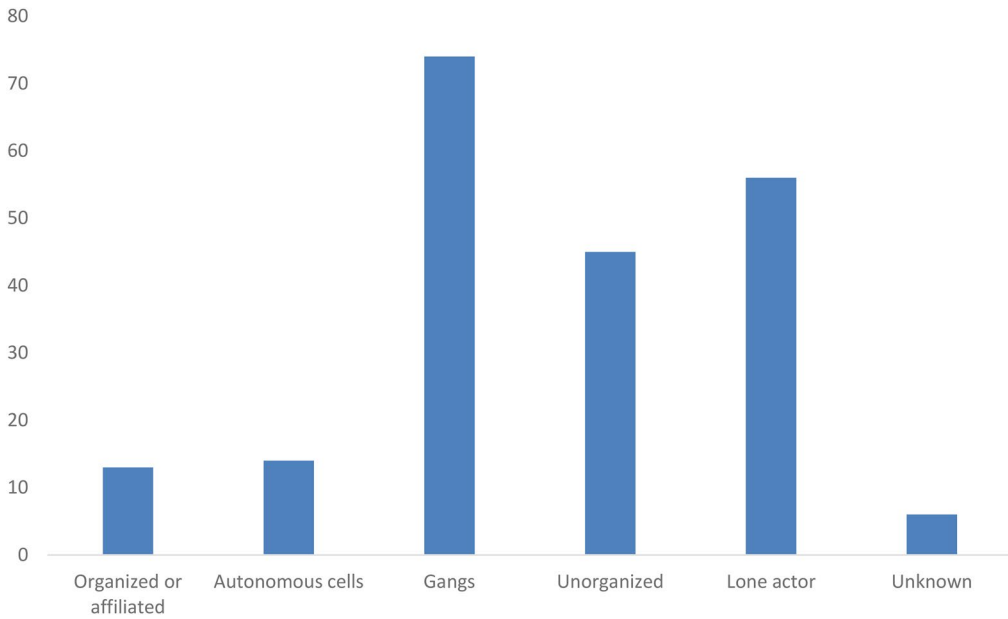


Figure 4. Fatal right-wing attacks in Western Europe by perpetrator type, 1990–2019 ($N=208$). Source: The RTV dataset.

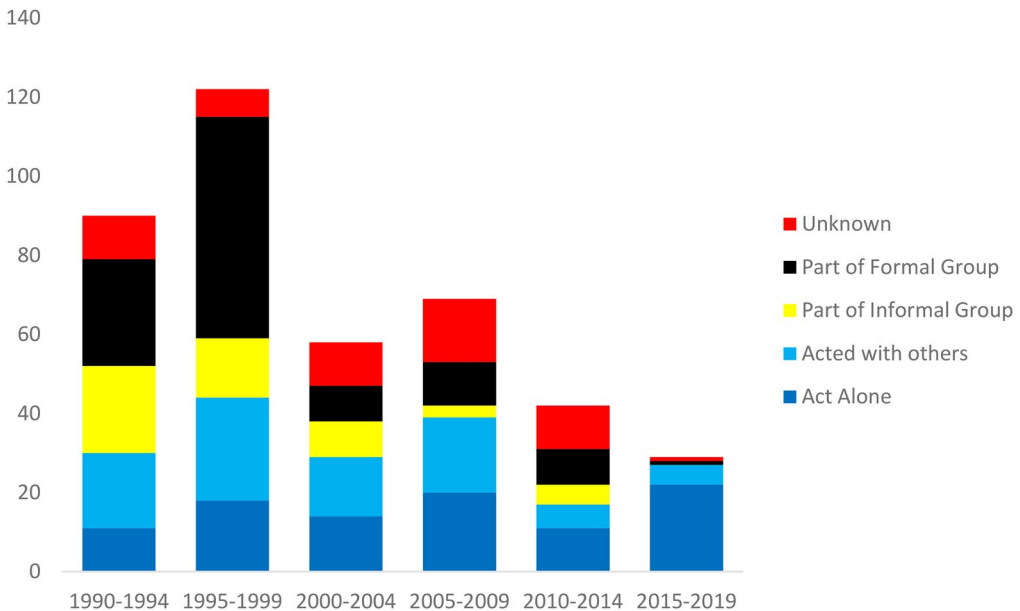


Figure 5. Fatal right-wing attacks in the United States by perpetrator type, 1990–2019. Source: The ECDB dataset.

ideological authorities active during this period. An ideological authority is understood here as a person whose writings and statements are widely read and shared within the revolutionary right movement and who has had a considerable impact in terms

of shaping ideological thinking and preferred revolutionary strategies. Manifestos written by famous terrorists may also turn these into ideological authorities, but only if their manifestos generate an ideological and strategic impact beyond the immediate impact resulting from the violent deeds of their authors. Put differently, are their followers mainly inspired by their actions or also by their words?

To be reckoned as a contemporary ideological authority in this study, three criteria must be met. First, key writings and statements must have been produced and published over the past two decades. This does not mean that past ideological authorities have no impact today or that they did not promote metapolitics as a strategy: Indeed, some did. However, because this article is concerned with a more recent turn toward metapolitics, modern writers are considered more relevant than older ones. The second criterion is having a considerable international readership. Because English is accessible to much larger audiences in Western democracies than any other language, this criterion clearly favors ideologues writing in English and those considered important enough to be translated into English by international publishing houses. Finally, the third criterion is promoting a revolutionary ethno-nationalist agenda, i.e. explicitly seeking to replace current democratic regimes with a fundamentally different society. This alternative society would in essence be an ethno-society, whose rules and procedures cater to the interests of a specific ethnic group and effectively exclude people of different ethnic origins, regardless of their nationality or citizenship.

Even with those three criteria in mind, it is in no way obvious precisely who constitutes the most important ideological authorities of today's revolutionary right. In the spirit of falsification, one relevant starting point would be to identify ideological authorities who do not promote metapolitics but rather promote violent strategies. Historically, some of the most important post-WWII ideological authorities within the revolutionary right did indeed consider violent strategies as a necessary and primary means for a revolutionary struggle, including Jean Thiriart, Pino Rauti, Yves Guillou (alias Yves Guérin-Sérac), Stefano Delle Chiaie, Joseph Tommasi, William Luther Pierce, Harold Covington, Louis Beam, and David Myatt, to name but a few.

However, besides lone-actor terrorists who left behind violent manifestos, such as Anders Behring Breivik and Brenton Tarrant, ideological authorities promoting violent strategies are surprisingly difficult to come across today, which in itself indicates a metapolitical turn within the organized part of the revolutionary right. Perhaps the only candidate is James Mason, who, following decades of inactivity, has been resurrected as an ideological authority by the group known as *Atomwaffen Division*, established in the United States in 2015. Mason is known for publishing the newsletter *SIEGE* between 1980 and 1986, which openly promoted violent revolutionary strategies. As he writes in the introduction to the third edition of the *SIEGE* collection, published by contemporary *SIEGE* fans in 2017: "Originally *SIEGE* was written just at a time when a number of us felt that the 'mass' idea had become an obvious failure. To spark a revolution while numbers [i.e. the proportion of white citizens] were still on our side seemed to be the only way to go."⁵³

However, not even Mason fulfills the criteria listed above, because his writings, notwithstanding their current popularity among *Atomwaffen* fans, were published decades ago. In addition, as I come back to below, Mason has recently been distancing

himself from violent methods, probably because his profile has been raised by *Atomwaffen Division* and consequently he fears being arrested and punished by the authorities.

In comparison, the list of contemporary ideological authorities promoting metapolitical strategies is too long to be reviewed in detail here. Instead, a brief overview of some of the most important ones is warranted. While the “fathers” of far-right metapolitics Armin Mohler and Julius Evola are dead,⁵⁴ the “godfathers” could be said to be Alain de Benoist and Guillaume Faye. De Benoist founded GRECE in 1968, and Faye became a member in 1970. As such, they have been active for many decades, and both are still active today. They also represent opposing sides of an interesting split within the original New Right-community that generated today’s Identitarian movement. Unlike many original New Right actors, the Identitarians may be considered part of the revolutionary right because they want to replace parliamentary democracy with some form of direct democracy that does not safeguard minority rights, and aim to re-migrate all people of non-Western descent currently residing in Europe and shut the European borders.⁵⁵ While explicitly promoting nonviolent strategies, Identitarian thinking has also impacted on other activists with even more extreme agendas, including Brenton Tarrant, the New Zealand mass murderer, who donated money to both the Austrian and the French divisions of *Generation Identity*.⁵⁶ This testifies to the potential danger of dismissing allegedly nonviolent yet fully revolutionary groups as nothing to worry about. Notably, before the attacks in New Zealand, the German authorities did not even consider the Identitarians as an extreme-right organization, while today, they are permanently being watched by the security authorities.⁵⁷

The Identitarian movement has no clear beginning, but it appears to have started with “a dissident current to GRECE’s metapolitical project” during the late 1980s.⁵⁸ This new current departed from the New Right in at least two important ways. The first concerns the Identitarians’ emphasis on ethnicity over any other issue. Preserving ethnic identities is seen as important but not necessarily a primary cause for the original New Right community. Therefore, prominent thinkers such as Alain de Benoist have attempted to distance themselves from the more ethnocentric perspectives of the Identitarians.⁵⁹

Second, the New Right community was seen as not *doing* much about ethnicity, but only speaking about it. While the New Right is primarily involved in writing books, publishing magazines, and organizing seminars, the Identitarians perceive themselves as a “fighting community.” The philosophical foundations for this new current are laid out in the writings of New Right dissidents such as Dominique Venner and Guillaume Faye, in particular Faye’s 2001 book entitled *Why We Fight*.⁶⁰

During the early 2000s, Identitarianism and metapolitics were concepts primarily known to people interested in the New Right. Around 2010, however, Identitarian ideas began to spread quickly. One reason was the 2010 launch of the Identitarian publishing house *Arktos*, which publishes English translations of key books by authors such as Guillaume Faye, Alain de Benoist, Dominique Venner, and many more.⁶¹ Once these ideas became easily available to an English-speaking audience, new actors in different countries started picking up on them. As a result, Identitarian ideas, including the metapolitical strategy, have been appropriated and adapted by groups and activists

who do not necessarily share the same ideological foundation as the original New Right thinkers. These include white nationalists from the United States, most notably from the so-called *Alt-Right* movement.⁶² The *Alt-Right* movement has in turn generated a new generation of ideological authorities promoting metapolitical ideas, including Richard Spencer,⁶³ Greg Johnson,⁶⁴ and Daniel Friberg.⁶⁵

A recent book published by Oxford University Press entitled *Key Thinkers of the Radical Right* presents 16 ideological authorities organized in three categories: classic thinkers; modern thinkers; and emergent thinkers. Notably, none of the modern or emergent thinkers presented in this volume promotes violent strategies, and many of them explicitly promote metapolitics, including Alain de Benoist, Guillaume Faye, Jared Taylor, Alexander Dugin, Greg Johnson, Richard Spencer, and Daniel Friberg.

To be sure, ideological authorities like these are not the only ones having an impact on the behavior and strategic considerations of revolutionary right activists. Other actors and milieus with notable impact include online communities as well as high-status terrorists. How ideological authorities respond to terrorist attacks committed by people “of their own kind” is also indicative of the strategic considerations being made inside the movement. On this note, there is considerable divergence between contemporary ideological authorities. Greg Johnson, for example, has gone quite far in defending terrorist attacks morally, while at the same time arguing that they are strategically unsound.⁶⁶ Furthermore, compared to most other ideological authorities explicitly promoting metapolitics, ideologues such as Johnson and Faye also resort to a rather violent rhetoric that some may interpret as a form of indirect promotion of violence, because they describe a future where violence will become inevitable.⁶⁷ I return to this dormant violent potential of the metapolitical strategy in the last section of this article. First, however, it may be useful to consider why metapolitics became so fashionable among right-wing revolutionaries during the 2000s and early 2010s.

Explaining the Metapolitical Turn of the Revolutionary Right

Having established that a metapolitical turn took place within the revolutionary right during the 2000s and early 2010s, we may now move on to ask why this was the case. This section briefly outlines three conditions that may help explain this development: (1) limited opportunities for armed resistance; (2) a subcultural style shift from violent skinheadism to bookish Identitarianism; and (3) new opportunities for promoting alternative worldviews online. Note that these are candidate explanations, in need of further empirical corroboration in future research.

Limited Opportunities for Armed Resistance

From the early 1960s up until the 1990s, a number of ideological authorities within the revolutionary right were advocating various forms of armed resistance to spur revolutionary change. In other words, optimism about violence as a relevant means was still highly present within the organized part of the movement, and a number of groups and organizations were able to operate semi-clandestinely with the ambition

of taking part in some form of armed resistance. Prominent examples from European countries include groups such as *Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari* and *Ordine Nuovo* in Italy,⁶⁸ *Aktion Widerstand*, *Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann* and *Deutsche Aktionsgruppen* in Germany,⁶⁹ and *Organization armée secrète* and *Groupe Charles-Martel* in France.⁷⁰ In the United States, prominent examples include groups such as the *Ku Klux Klan*, *The Order*, and *The Covenant, The Sword, and the Arm of the Lord*.⁷¹

Today, revolutionary groups maintaining public profiles while at the same time pursuing a terrorist agenda hardly exist, apart from online groups whose members remain anonymous and loosely organized. One reason is that it has become increasingly difficult to maintain a revolutionary organization with terrorist ambitions without being dismantled by the police and intelligence services. Over the past decades, surveillance technology has advanced considerably and extensive security measures have been implemented in most countries to prevent Islamist terrorism post 9/11. Furthermore, although police and intelligence agencies are regularly accused of being “blind on the right eye”, i.e. for prioritizing Islamist threats over those from the extreme right,⁷² those extreme-right groups that have pursued a terrorist agenda have been dismantled by law enforcement. These include *Combat 18* and *National Action* in the U.K.,⁷³ *Blood and Honor Scandinavia* and *Vitt Ariskt Motstånd* (White Aryan Resistance) in Scandinavia,⁷⁴ *Kameradschaft Treptow* and the wider network of the *Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund* (NSU) in Germany,⁷⁵ and *Atomwaffen Division* and *The Base* in the United States.⁷⁶

Another reason why it is difficult to run an extreme-right organization with terrorist ambitions today is that, unlike Islamist terrorists, extreme-right revolutionaries lack safe havens outside Western democracies. Some might regard Putin’s Russia and Eastern Ukraine as two such places. However, we have yet to see terrorist attacks in Western democracies ordered by leaders residing in Russia or Eastern Ukraine.

Finally, while some of the earliest terrorist groups such as *Organization armée secrète* and *Ordine Nuovo* benefited from public support as well as support from elements within the military, police, and security services, such public and elite support is today largely unthinkable in most Western countries due to a general democratic consolidation. That said, both Germany and the United States might represent outlier cases in this regard as both countries, in part due to their large populations, also host comparatively large numbers (thousands) of right-wing extremists, including members of the police, intelligence agencies and military.⁷⁷ In most other Western democracies, however, the revolutionary right has become a marginalized movement with little or no public or elite support.

As a result of this shift in the strategic operating environment, leaderless resistance remains the only viable revolutionary strategy in which violence is seen as a primary means. However, since this strategy was popularized through Louis Beam’s essay of 1992, and then gained momentum within the revolutionary right throughout the 1990s, it never triggered a sufficient number of terrorist attacks to ignite a race war and never led to anything near revolutionary momentum, and was therefore scrapped by most ideological authorities during the 2000s.

More recently, a new generation of mainly online-based activists communicating at the trans-national level via anonymous web forums has rediscovered the strategy of leaderless resistance, leading to several mass killings perpetrated by self-radicalized

lone-actor terrorists. However, there is little concerted effort behind these attacks. They have also led to increased attention from the police and intelligence services as well as from social media corporations, thereby making preparations for future attacks via online communities more difficult than previously.

Improved surveillance technology and intelligence combined with a general democratic consolidation have made it very hard to run a proper revolutionary organization with terrorist ambitions today. This leaves right-wing revolutionaries with two options: operate in public but refrain from illegal behavior (metapolitics); or operate underground, but with limited organizational structures (leaderless resistance).

Subcultural Style Shift

A number of studies have demonstrated the paramount role that group subculture, style, and identity can play in the formation and trajectories of extremist groups and networks.⁷⁸ Some would even argue that the desire for in-group recognition shapes the behavior of many activists more than their desire to achieve the group's strategic aims.⁷⁹ One way of achieving in-group recognition is by adopting the style seen as fashionable within the group and the larger movement it belongs to at any point in time. As such, style may refer to conventional stylistic markers such as clothes, hair-styles, tattoos, symbols, music preferences, and language, but also to more general behavioral expressions and attitudes.

Some styles are more violent than others. While some styles cultivate brutal violence and emotionally driven behavior, such as criminal gang cultures, others cultivate moderation and civilized behavior, such as the Gandhi-inspired peace movement. Within the revolutionary right, the styles in fashion change over time, just as in any other subculture. Notably, there has over the past 30 years been a subcultural style shift away from the inherently violent and brutish skinhead subculture toward a new stylistic expression often referred to as Identitarianism, aimed at being seen as more civilized and sophisticated, yet edgy enough to attract young activists looking for action.⁸⁰

This subcultural style shift may have had a considerable impact on the revolutionary right's propensity for violence during the 2000s and early 2010s. Notably, in Western Europe, racist and skinhead gangs were behind a considerable share of all fatal violence with a right-wing motivation since 1990, most of which occurred during the 1990s and early 2000s, as shown in [Figure 6](#).

[Figure 6](#) also shows how gang violence has decreased substantially over the past 10 to 15 years, indicating the subcultural trend shift discussed here.

Another indicator of this subcultural style shift is the amount of cultural events and products produced for the neo-Nazi skinhead scene, which has dropped significantly over the past 10 to 15 years.⁸¹ For example, the publication frequency of the U.K.-based magazine *Blood & Honor*, which serves as a reference guide for most members of this scene, has dropped dramatically since its heyday in the late 1990s. In most West European countries, the skinhead scene has disappeared altogether.⁸²

At the same time, the number of cultural events and products produced for the Identitarian movement, such as seminars, books, and public protest events, grew during

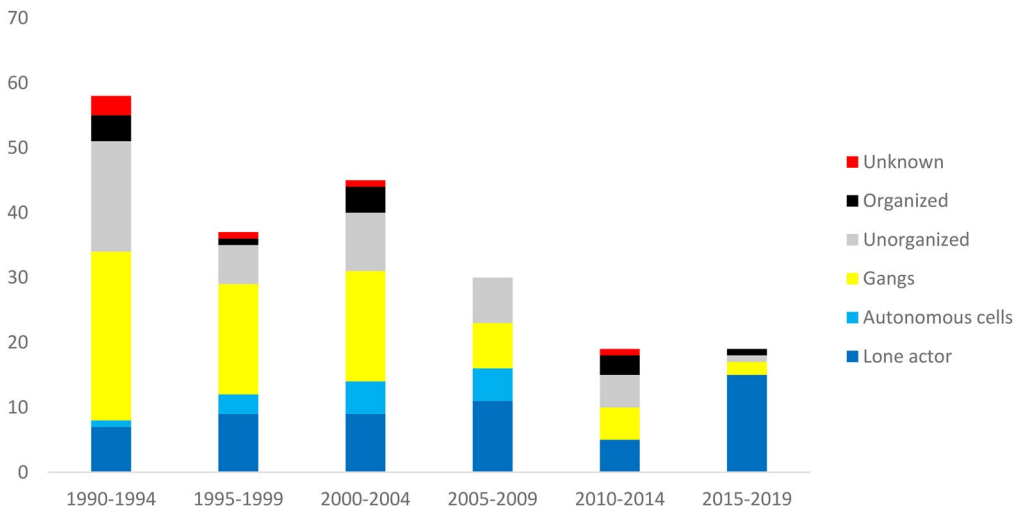


Figure 6. Fatal right-wing attacks in Western Europe by perpetrator type, 1990–2019. Source: The RTV dataset.

the same period, suggesting that Identitarianism was the new style in fashion during the 2000s and early 2010s.⁸³ Furthermore, Identitarian style and metapolitics go hand in hand, as each is a natural reflection of the other. The essence of metapolitics is cultural struggle, and style is clearly an important element of any revolutionary youth culture. In turn, a civilized and sophisticated style does not go well with violent tactics, at least not in the context of liberal democracies, so the metapolitical strategy of influencing politics through ideas and cultural expressions makes perfect sense for Identitarian activists.

New Opportunities for Promoting Alternative Worldviews Online

Although the revolutionary right has always been at the forefront of internet use,⁸⁴ opportunities for using the internet to spread propaganda, recruit new followers, and raise money for the cause have until recently been limited by the number of available internet users in Western democracies. According to the International Telecommunications Union, the share of internet users in developed countries changed from about 10 users per 100 inhabitants in the late 1990s to about 50 around 2005, and more than 80 users per 100 inhabitants in 2018.⁸⁵ This exponential growth has had a dramatic impact in most interest arenas, including that of revolutionary resistance. Before widespread use of the internet, dissemination of revolutionary propaganda and online recruitment were severely constrained in Western democracies, due to technological and geographical limitations as well as government restrictions. Today, these restrictions have been largely dissolved by the internet, with its global reach and unrestricted nature. For a movement that is marginal by definition and whose potential followers are geographically widespread, such an opportunity is worth its weight in gold.

A notable change has in this regard been the development of alternative information spheres and online communities tailored to the specific interests of their users, and

lacking the editorial practices and integrity of conventional media. As a result, users who are drawn into these online spheres are likely to experience feelings of unity, strength, and purpose without being contested or challenged by alternative views. Through the internet, activists are thus able to build entire online communities, whose followers may be situated anywhere in the world but who share core values and ideas, and who may also use the internet to organize themselves, plan events, and come together in “the real world.”

This has certainly been the case with the Identitarian movement, which during the 2010s became one of the most influential movements on the revolutionary right in Europe.⁸⁶ One important reason for its relative success has been the Identitarians’ sophisticated use of the internet and social media. In fact, global awareness of the Identitarian movement was largely triggered by a meticulously designed YouTube video from the original French division of *Generation Identity* entitled *A Declaration of War*, a video that went viral following its launch in 2012. Since then, internet-savvy *Generation Identity* activists have continued to exploit the internet and social media to their own benefit, and managed to inspire the creation of new branches, groups, and networks all across Europe as well as in the United States (*American Identity Movement*, formerly known as *Identity Evropa*), Canada (*ID-Canada*), and Australia (*ID-Australia*).

Finally, the internet is probably even more useful for revolutionary movements operating within legal boundaries than for terrorist groups. Notwithstanding the freedoms offered by the internet to rebels and revolutionaries, Western governments have proved to be willing and able to crack down on the internet use of some of the most potent terrorist groups such as *al Qaida* and *Islamic State*.⁸⁷ Online repression of nonviolent movements is, however, more difficult because it undermines core liberal values and civil rights such as freedom of expression. The potential for maximizing the utility of the internet is therefore higher for nonviolent revolutionaries than for violent ones. That said, *Generation Identity* has been facing mass removal of their online propaganda, after it became known that Brenton Tarrant supported them financially and was inspired by their ideas.⁸⁸

To sum up, during the 2000s and early 2010s, metapolitics was arguably a logical choice for right-wing revolutionaries because of their limited opportunities for armed resistance, new subcultural trends, and new opportunities for disseminating (nonviolent) propaganda online. However, as long as their metapolitical struggle does not come to fruition, some activists will at some point get tired of organizing meetings, engaging in public debates, and reading books. At that point, other options will be considered, including violent ones.

The Dormant Violent Potential of Metapolitics

The metapolitical strategy is by definition considered as a pre-stage – a pre-revolutionary phase. Therein lies its dormant violent potential. Historically, metapolitics has often been accompanied or followed by more militant forms of activism, including terrorism. A case in point is the Italian group *Ordine Nuovo*, originally founded in 1954 as a study center (*Centro Studi Ordine Nuovo*) primarily engaged in cultural activities such

as study circles, seminars, and propaganda. Its goal was to reinvigorate traditional Fascist ideas in post-WWII Italy. However, factions within the group soon became impatient and started pulling in the direction of more militancy and violence. As a result, *Ordine Nuovo* and its descendants ended up taking part in a prolonged and highly lethal campaign of terrorism and violence that marred Italy during the 1970s in particular.⁸⁹

Can we expect a similar development today? Due to its pre-revolutionary nature, a metapolitical strategy has four logical continuations: (1) a gradual parliamentary dismantling of Western liberal democracies; (2) attempts at a forced revolution, once the metapolitical struggle has reached a critical mass of public support; (3) engaging in a premature terrorist campaign; or (4) continuing the metapolitical struggle and waiting for better times. Each of these scenarios presents distinct challenges to Western governments; each is worth brief consideration.

In the first scenario, the amorphous leaderless network of the metapolitical right will at some point be fused or operate in parallel with a political party and ultimately end with the development of an ethno-state. This is probably the least likely scenario, but is also the most sinister one, considering that it implies an actual system change. It is least likely, because there is to date little indication that the core ideas and values of the revolutionary right appeal to more than a small fraction of Western youths,⁹⁰ and public support for liberal democratic values remains high and stable.⁹¹ At the same time, some evidence suggests that satisfaction with the performance of contemporary democracies is eroding, in particular in some countries and among younger generations.⁹² The question remains, however, whether the revolutionary right offers a sufficiently attractive alternative for dissatisfied youths to allow it actually to gain political influence through the parliamentary system, without severely compromising its own core values and beliefs. For example, considering the multi-ethnic composition of most Western democracies today, the idea that certain peoples should have precedence over others in certain territories, simply because of their racial or ethnic descent, is likely far too extreme, or anti-democratic, for most people. Therefore, more moderate actors within the far-right universe, such as radical right parties who accept people of different ethnic origins as long as they assimilate to the majoritarian culture, are more likely to gain power via the parliamentary system, as we are already witnessing.⁹³

In the second scenario, loosely organized metapolitical networks will develop into more organized vanguard organizations, possibly in parallel with a clandestine cell system, once the metapolitical struggle has reached a critical mass of public support. The case of *Ordine Nuovo* and similar Italian groups such as *Avanguardia Nazionale* fit this scenario. But it has become a less likely scenario, because a critical mass of public support seems implausible in the near future, as explained above. However, in a time of alternative information spheres, fake news, and closed online communities, it would not be surprising if some people came to believe that they at some point could generate the public support necessary to force through a revolution. This was vividly illustrated by the attempted siege of the United States' Congress at Capitol Hill in Washington on 6 January 2021. Notably, in the days and weeks following this dramatic event, many of those involved or supporting this attempted siege expressed surprise and disappointment as they realized that the revolution was nowhere as near as they had anticipated.⁹⁴

Considering that sufficient public support is currently lacking for groups such as these to gain revolutionary momentum, this second scenario mainly represents a policing challenge. As an increasing number of right-wing revolutionaries engage in political violence, typically against political opponents or the police, scaled and reasonable reactions from the police and the public at large are critical to avoid the type of violent backlash that may result from excessive policing and public repression and cause further polarization and conflict.⁹⁵

In the third scenario, the metapolitical strategy is scrapped altogether, and replaced by a premature terrorist campaign. There are already signs of this scenario unfolding within the more loosely organized online branch of the movement. One particularly interesting case in this regard is the American group or network named *Atomwaffen Division* and its internal disagreement on whether or not to engage in a leaderless terrorist campaign. *Atomwaffen Division* was first introduced on an online forum called Iron March in 2015. The original members of the group were based in the United States, and the group immediately drew a lot of attention because it openly supported terrorism and the strategy of leaderless resistance. Its main ideological inspiration came from the compilation of old SIEGE newsletters from the 1980s authored by James Mason and referred to above. Over the following years, *Atomwaffen Division* organized several so-called “hate camps,” in which members would train for armed resistance. However, most of the network’s activities have been online, and it has yet to carry out any actual terrorist attack.

Then, in 2019, a series of mass shootings and attempted mass shootings were carried out by lone actors in the United States, New Zealand, Norway, and Germany.⁹⁶ As a result, the American Department of Homeland Security (DHS) made the unprecedented move of describing domestic terrorism, in particular white supremacist violence, as “as big a threat as Islamist terrorism.”⁹⁷ This move from the DHS had detrimental implications for groups assumed to be behind this domestic terrorist threat, such as *Atomwaffen Division*. Consequently, James Mason was quick to announce publicly that *Atomwaffen Division* was not involved in any form of illegal activity and that it had absolutely nothing to do with these mass shootings, which was technically true.⁹⁸ Shortly after, however, a new propaganda video was released, apparently from *Atomwaffen Division*, clearly encouraging similar mass shootings and leaderless resistance.⁹⁹ Once again, Mason went public with a counter-recording, explaining that this video was fake and did not represent the view of the real *Atomwaffen Division*. Ultimately, Mason decided to dissolve *Atomwaffen Division* because of these “rogue elements” trying to pull the group in a more violent direction.¹⁰⁰

The story does not end here, but it serves to illustrate how the decision to engage in armed resistance remains highly contested among contemporary activists and ideological authorities on the revolutionary right, including some of the most extreme cases.¹⁰¹ It also shows how difficult it is to maintain a proper revolutionary organization with a public profile, while at the same time being suspected of supporting or preparing for terrorist attacks.

Finally, in the fourth scenario, the metapolitical struggle continues and violent strategies remain temporarily restrained as most dedicated activists recognize that the time is still not ripe for a governmental take-over or an extensive terrorist campaign.¹⁰²

As long as a majority of people support basic principles of liberal democracy, uphold trust in democratic institutions, and do not face dire economic or social problems, mobilizing for armed revolutionary struggle will remain a difficult task. However, should these conditions change profoundly, the ground will become more fertile for armed resistance. Therefore, metapolitical activists can be expected to continue their tenacious work aimed at eroding people's beliefs in liberal democracy, or, as Julius Evola, the godfather of metapolitics would have put it: "ride the tiger."¹⁰³

Conclusion

I began this article by asking what you, as an ardent right-wing revolutionary, would do to spur revolutionary change in a Western democracy today. The answer is, as the article illustrates, not at all evident. Compared to many other revolutionary movements, those of the revolutionary right are lacking popular support, financial resources and safe havens. This hostile operating environment poses a number of strategic challenges concerning organization and openness. To resolve some of these challenges, right-wing revolutionaries have been experimenting with different strategies of revolutionary resistance. By outlining four ideal types – vanguardism, leaderless resistance, the cell system, and metapolitics – I have illustrated the logic, strengths, and weaknesses of each of these strategies. I also argued that metapolitics became a preferred strategy for many revolutionaries during the 2000s and early 2010s, and that vanguardism and the cell system have become increasingly difficult to implement while openly promoting terrorism.

One theoretical implication of my analysis is that we may benefit from analyzing members of the revolutionary right as rational actors continuously adapting to the strategic context in which they are operating. As Louis Beam wrote in his famous essay of 1992: "those who oppose state repression must be prepared to alter, adapt, and modify their behavior, strategy, and tactics as circumstances warrant."¹⁰⁴ At the same time, my analysis also suggests that revolutionary decision-making is influenced by styles in fashion and online communication opportunities. Future research might therefore benefit from further investigating how this peculiar mix of rational choice theory, subcultural theory, and communication theory could offer new insights into the strategic decision-making of revolutionary actors.

Given the present strategic context, a majority of right-wing revolutionaries will likely continue to refrain from violence and stick to metapolitics or nonviolent forms of vanguardism. This prediction is in line with findings from contemporary research on why terrorist and militant groups refrain from using violence.¹⁰⁵ By implication, one should be careful about exaggerating the terrorist threat stemming from the revolutionary right today. In doing so, one could risk implementing countermeasures that may end up having unintended opposite effects, as was arguably the case after 9/11.¹⁰⁶ However, one should also recognize that the more loosely organized part of the movement, predominantly active online, is becoming increasingly anxious to go down a more violent path by way of leaderless resistance.¹⁰⁷ As a result, the revolutionary right is currently positioned at a crossroads where different actors and milieus will opt for different solutions.

For those tasked with preventing political violence and extremism, these findings first and foremost imply that one should consider different approaches to revolutionaries opting for nonviolent strategies versus those who are more likely to go down a violent path. For example, confronting those opting for metapolitical activism using conventional counter-terrorism methods such as infiltration or surveillance will most likely be futile because there are no illegal activities to disclose. At worst, such intrusive measures could produce backlash effects and cause further frustration and anger with “the system” among people who were not breaking any laws and therefore have potential for further radicalization.

At the same time, it is important not to underestimate the dormant violent potential of metapolitics as a revolutionary strategy. Although its proponents may preach non-violence and look inconspicuous, they are the ones spending their days and weeks pondering how a future revolutionary outcome – a complete dismantling of Western democracy – can be achieved. That is why paying special attention to the revolutionary right will remain an important task, both today and tomorrow.

Notes

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