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Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Putin's Russia

by Johannes Due Enstad

Abstract

This article introduces the case of right-wing terrorism and violence in Putin's Russia into the purview of terrorism studies. It explores the modus operandi of Russian right-wing militants by analyzing a new dataset, RTV-RUSSIA, which includes nearly 500 violent events covering the period 2000-2017. Compared to their Western European counterparts, Russian right-wing militants have operated more violently (with attacks being more frequent) as well as more purposefully (with a larger share of premeditated attacks). The article offers a historical and a comparative explanation. The first answers the question of why a wave of right-wing violence occurred in the 2000s, stressing the socio-economic turbulence of the 1990s, increasing immigration, ideological radicalization amid restrictive political opportunities and a permissive discursive environment, and the rise of the internet as an arena for spreading violent propaganda. The comparative explanation tackles the question of why Russia has seen so much more right-wing violence than Western countries, highlighting the combination of anocratic regime type, high violence levels, high immigration, and low social stigmatization of extreme-right views.

Keywords: Terrorism; violence; right-wing; Russia; modus operandi; dataset

Introduction

It is about time to introduce the case of right-wing militancy in post-Soviet Russia into the field of terrorism and political violence studies. To the limited extent that terrorism scholars have studied the extreme right, the Russian case has so far remained beyond the radar.[1] As this article will show, Putin's Russia has seen much more right-wing violence than any other comparable country in the past 25 years. There can be little doubt as to the importance of this particular case as a piece in the larger puzzle of how and why right-wing violence and terrorism occurs.

This article also contributes to the literature on the extreme right in post-Soviet Russia. Scholars of nationalism and the far right in Russia have primarily dealt with issues concerning identity, discourse, ideology, and politics; few have ventured to study the sharp end of this phenomenon—violent activism. There are some notable exceptions. Scholars such as Mihai Varga and Richard Arnold have explored various aspects of right-wing violence in post-Soviet Russia, producing insights into some of the social and political dynamics involved (e.g., the role of government-created opportunities, nationalist public opinion, and the strategic choices of militant leaders in facilitating violence).[2] Moreover, the numerous analytical reports by Nataliia Iudina and others at the SOVA Center provide year-by-year snapshots of the developing situation on the Russian extreme-right, making for a valuable source of information.[3] What has been lacking, however, and what this article seeks to provide, is an empirically thorough overview of right-wing militancy in Putin's Russia, including the landscape of militant actors and their modus operandi.

In what follows, a new event dataset, Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Russia (RTV-RUSSIA), compiled by the author and including 495 incidents of right-wing violence occurring in the period 2000-2017, will be presented and analyzed in order to explore how Russian right-wing militants organize, how they go about when carrying out attacks, and whom they target. Next, the article moves on to look at how the modus operandi developed over time in the period 2000-2017. Finally, two explanations are offered: the first is a historical explanation to account for the observed wave of violence in the 2000s: Why did it occur at this particular point in time? The second is a comparative explanation to account for the high level of right-wing violence in Russia relative to Western Europe.

Event Data

The RTV-RUSSIA dataset currently consists of 495 events, including 406 deadly events causing 459 deaths over a period of eighteen years (2000-2017). RTV-RUSSIA has been patterned on the RTV dataset (Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe) compiled by Jacob Ravndal,[4] and features the same set of variables (date, location, event type, perpetrator type, perpetrator's organizational affiliation, victim, weapon(s) used, number of casualties, as well as a description of the event).

RTV-RUSSIA is built largely by relying on sources compiled by the SOVA Center, a Moscow-based NGO that has been monitoring right-wing violence systematically since 2004.[5] For preceding years, events have been registered using information gathered from secondary literature and news reports. Sifting through SOVA's online event database, the author studied each entry carefully, read the attached sources (predominantly Russian-language media reports), and decided whether or not to include the event. In the process, about 200 deadly events registered in the SOVA database were left out, as a right-wing motivation could not be established. In the typical event left out, a person belonging to one of the victim groups was found stabbed or beaten to death, but no perpetrator or witness could be found. While SOVA researchers have included many such events, typically based on observations of the victim's ethnicity and the fact of multiple stab wounds (a typical feature of racist attacks), in RTV-RUSSIA, most of them have been left out because of a lack of information.

Although an offspring of the RTV dataset, RTV-RUSSIA in its current state differs somewhat from its parent with regard to inclusion criteria. RTV-RUSSIA includes the following types of violent event: (1) attacks with a fatal outcome; (2) attacks and known plots involving explosive devices; and (3) pogroms, defined as onslaughts involving large groups of attackers (dozens or more), typically targeting marketplaces or migrants' dormitories. While RTV also includes non-fatal attacks involving the use of deadly weapons such as knives, RTV-RUSSIA currently does not include this category.

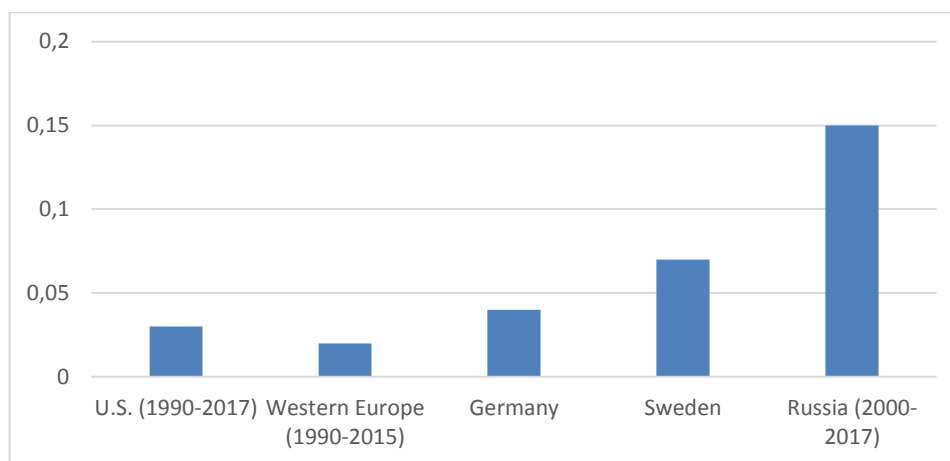
Why not register non-lethal beatings and stabbings? While such events are certainly serious enough, leaving victims hospitalized, traumatized, and terrorized, they are also more likely to go unreported. Many of the victims are illegal labor migrants who will not report to the police or talk to journalists. The registered number of non-lethal stabbings and beatings, then, is likely to be substantially lower than the real number of such occurrences. When someone is killed, a bomb explodes, or a large-scale pogrom occurs, the event is more likely to be reported in the media and thus make its way into the SOVA Center's database. By registering these categories, we probably capture something close to the universe of such events.

Organization, Weapons, Targeting

Let us break down the RTV-RUSSIA dataset in order to inspect more closely the phenomenon of Russian right-wing militancy. How do activists organize, what weapons do they use, and whom do they target? When defining this particular beast, we have the good fortune, thanks to the RTV dataset published in 2016, of being able to compare its features with those of its Western European relative.

The single most striking feature on the Russian side is the amount of violence, measured by the number of attacks with a lethal outcome. In Western Europe, with eighteen countries inhabited by 401.7 million people (2005 UN estimate), right-wing militants have carried out 190 lethal attacks killing 303 persons over a period of twenty-six years (1990-2015). (Note that 25% of these victims died in one single event, the 2011 Norway attacks.) Russia, according to RTV-RUSSIA, has witnessed 406 deadly right-wing attacks with 458 people killed over a period of eighteen years (2000-2017). Taking into account differences in population size and the number of years for which we have data, Figure 1 shows how Russia has seen five times more violence than the U.S.,[6] 750% more than Western Europe as a whole,[7] nearly four times more than Germany, and twice as much as Sweden (Sweden and Germany have the highest counts in Western Europe).

Figure 1: Deadly Events per Million Inhabitants per Year



What kinds of perpetrators are behind the violence in Russia?[8] As indicated in Table 1 below, gangs and unorganized groups have carried out most of the attacks (135 and 91 events, respectively), being jointly responsible for 62% of events with a known perpetrator type. They are followed by organized groups (54 events/15%) and autonomous cells (41 events/11%). The share of events with an unknown perpetrator type is quite high (26%). While the type of perpetrator could not be established in these cases, the known circumstances surrounding the events nevertheless left little reasonable doubt as to the attackers’ right-wing motivation.

Table 1. All Events, by Perpetrator Type and Violence Type

Perpetrator type	Type of Violence					Sum
	Premeditated attacks	Spontaneous attacks	Plots	Preparation for armed struggle	Unknown	
Organized groups	48	3	2	-	1	54
Affiliated members	10	1	2	-	1	14
Autonomous cells	34	-	7	-	-	41
Gangs	121	12	-	-	2	135
Unorganized	74	15	1	-	1	91
Lone actors	16	8	2	1	1	28
Shadow groups	-	-	-	-	1	1
Unknown	104	7	2	1	16	130
Total	408	46	16	2	23	495

How do the organizational features of Russian right-wing violence measure up to what we see in Western Europe? Given the partly differing inclusion criteria in RTV-RUSSIA and RTV, we need to isolate events with a lethal outcome in order to make a valid comparison. Table 2 shows that while the predominance of gangs and unorganized groups (jointly responsible for 71% of all deadly attacks with a known perpetrator type) is similar

to what we see in Western Europe (62%), a striking difference appears when looking at lone actors. While Western European solo terrorists have carried out 22% of the lethal attacks causing 44% of all fatal victims (25% if we exclude the 2011 Norway attacks), in Russia lone actors account for just 7% of such events and 6% of all fatal victims. Another marked difference is found in the ratio of premeditated to spontaneous attacks, which amounts to 1.2:1 in Western Europe and 7.5:1 in Russia. Russia’s low share of lone actors and high share of premeditated attacks suggests a higher level of organized militancy and a stronger ideological commitment among activists.

Table 2. Deadly Events by Perpetrator Type and Violence Type, Russia and Western Europe. (Bracketed Figures refer to Norway’s 2011 Breivik Attacks).

Perpetrator type	Type of Violence			Sum (killed), Russia	Sum (killed), Western Europe
	Premeditated attacks, RUS/WE	Spontaneous attacks, RUS/WE	Unknown/ other, RUS/WE		
Organized groups	34/1	3/1	1/1	38 (56)	3 (5)
Affiliated members	8/7	1/3	1/0	10 (12)	10 (10)
Autonomous cells	15/13	0/1	0/0	15 (17)	14 (18)
Gangs	103/36	11/36	2/0	116 (127)	72 (76)
Unorganized	73/20	15/24	1/0	89 (93)	41 (55)
Lone actors	12/21	8/20	1/0	21 (26)	41 (56 [+77])
Shadow groups	0/2	0/0	1/0	1 (1)	2 (2)
Unknown	93/4	7/0	16/0	116 (127)	4 (4)
Total	338/104	45/85	23/1	406 (459)	190 (226 [303])

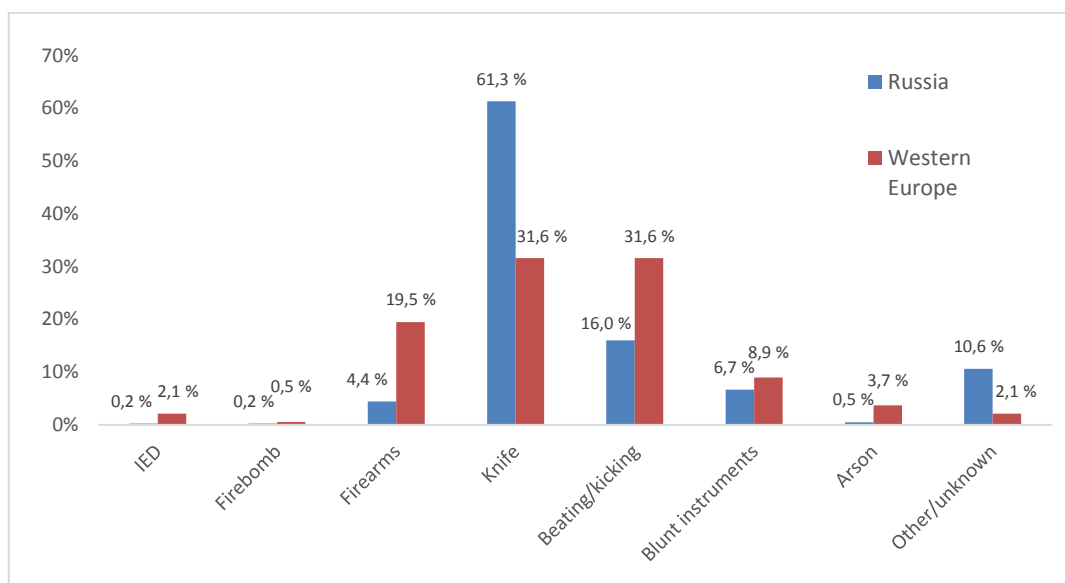
Moving on to look at the scale of events with a lethal outcome, the vast majority of such attacks, as shown in Table 3, whether carried out by groups or individuals, has led to the death of a single person (92%). In fact, in the midst of all the killing, there is only one event that comes close to a mass-casualty attack—the bombing of the Cherkizovo marketplace in Moscow in August 2006, in which 14 people died. In Western Europe, too, just one large-scale attack has occurred, while no more than a handful of attacks have resulted in more than one or two deaths. Right-wing violence and terrorism in Russia has been a low-scale phenomenon like in Western Europe, but with a substantially higher frequency. (Bracketed Figures refer to Norway’s 2011 Breivik Attacks).

Next, we consider the weapons preference of right-wing militants in Russia as compared to Western Europe. Looking at events with a lethal outcome, we see that while activists in both settings have mostly preferred primitive weapons or unarmed attacks (Russians displaying a particular affinity for the knife), the share of attacks involving firearms, IEDs, and arson is substantially greater in Western Europe (25%) than in Russia (5%).

Table 3. Deadly Events by Perpetrator Type and Number of Fatal Victims

Perpetrator type	Scale of Attacks					Total
	1 victim	2 victims	3 victims	4 victims	14 victims	
Organized groups	33	3	1		1	38
Affiliated members	8	2				10
Autonomous cells	14		1			15
Gangs	108	6	1	1		116
Unorganized	86	2	1			89
Lone actors	16	5				21
Shadow groups	1					1
Unknown	108	5	3			116
Total	374	23	7	1	1	406

Figure 2. Weapons Use (Deadly Events)



Predictably, right-wing militants mainly target persons they consider racial/ethnic enemies, first and foremost non-white immigrants. Yet there is substantial variation from east to west. As Figures 3 and 4 show, Russian militants have targeted “racial enemies”[9] more often than their Western European counterparts (78% versus 55% of all events with a lethal outcome). Western militants’ targeting has been more evenly spread out across the spectrum of enemies. The left is targeted more often in Western Europe, probably reflecting the presence of a larger, more entrenched left-wing movement that engages more intensively (and perhaps more violently) with the extreme right. The category of “Other” is about five times larger in Western Europe, and includes a variety of target groups, the most frequent being LGBT persons (ten events) and Muslims (four events). In Russia, no deadly attack has explicitly targeted Muslims. It is worth noting that Jews, commonly assumed to be a main target of right-wing extremists, have been at the receiving end of just two deadly events in Russia and two in Western Europe.[10]

Figure 3. Russia: targeting (deadly events)

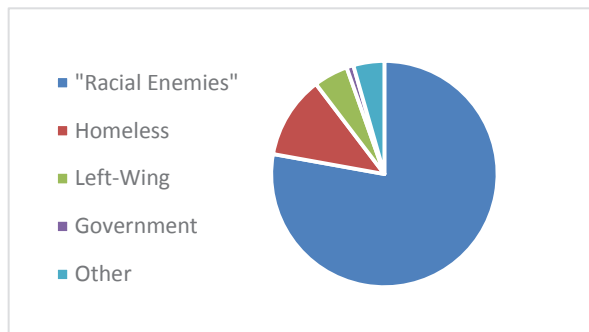
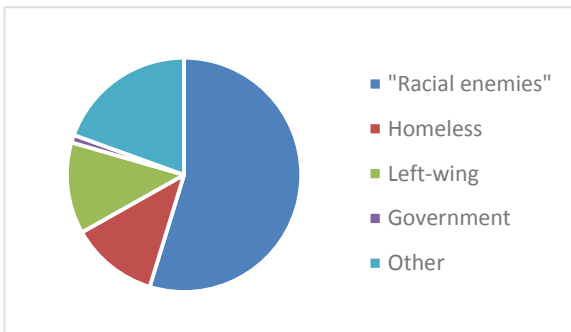


Figure 4. Western Europe: targeting (deadly events)

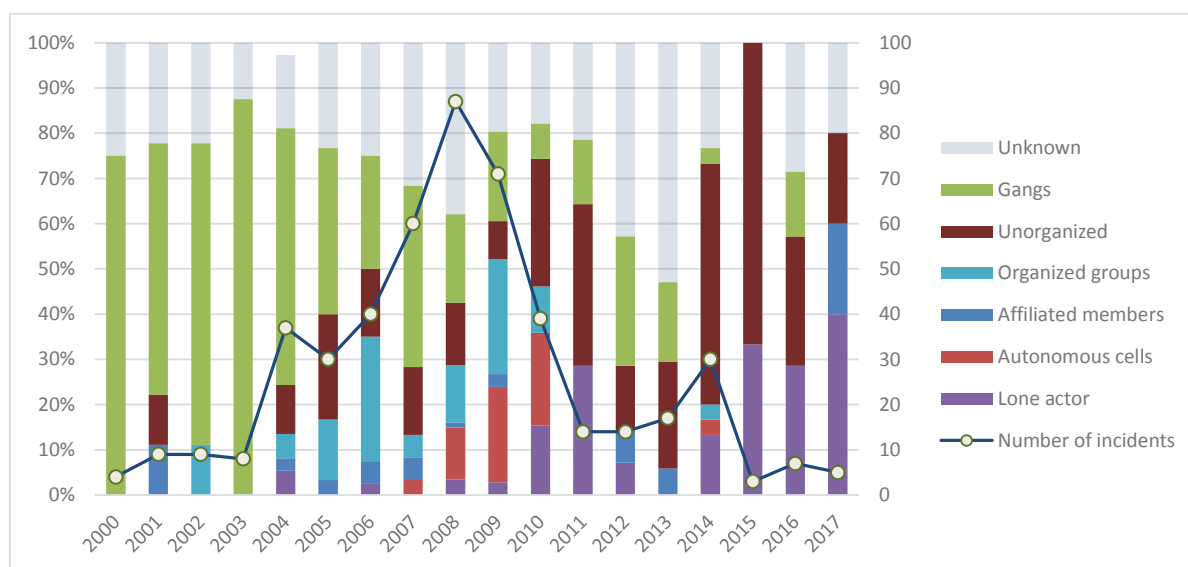


Patterns of Change and Continuity, 2000-2017

So far, the features of right-wing terrorism and violence in Russia have been surveyed from different angles, using 18 years of data and comparisons with Western Europe to form an overview of the overall phenomenon. In order better to understand what has been going on, however, we need to study change and stability over time. How have organizational features and attack patterns developed in the past two decades?

In Figure 5, the columns indicate the share of various perpetrator types for all events, while the line shows the total number of events, year by year. The clearest pattern emerging here is the gradual decline of gangs. By the time the wave of violence peaked in 2008-09, gangs were no longer the predominant type of perpetrator. While gangs accounted for 51% of all attacks with a known perpetrator type in the period 2000-2008, their share dropped to 19% for the period 2009 to 2017. As gangs receded, organized groups and autonomous cells began to appear more frequently in the landscape of violent activism, jointly accounting for 33% of attacks with a known perpetrator type in the years 2004-2010, after which they all but disappeared from the scene. Also notable, the share of lone actor attacks has increased more than six-fold, from 3% of all events with a known perpetrator type in the period 2000-2009 to 19% in the period 2010-2017. In this respect, Russia seems to follow in the West’s footsteps—in both the U.S. and Western Europe, scholars have reported an increase in lone-actor terrorism in recent decades.[11]

Figure 5. Perpetrator Type (%) and Number of Events, 2000-2017 (all Events)



Moving on to focus on weapon use over time (Figure 6), it is clear that while knife attacks and beatings dominate in most years, the period 2006-2011 witnessed a rise in the use of IEDs. The same period also saw an increase in the number of known failed plots (from zero in the period 2000-2005, to fifteen in the period 2006-2011),

several of which could have caused massive damage had they been carried out. In one case, an 8-kg explosive device was to be detonated in a crowded public place; another event involved a 2.5-kg ammonium nitrate-based device packed with ceramic and glass shrapnel that was intended to explode in a McDonald’s restaurant in Moscow. Another powerful device was to go off inside a club during an anti-fascist conference, potentially killing “a great number of people”, according to police sources.[12] The failure of these and several other plots resulted from a combination of sheer luck, vigilant police work, and incompetence on the part of the would-be bombers.

Figure 6. Weapon Use (%) and Number of Events, 2000-2017 (all Events)

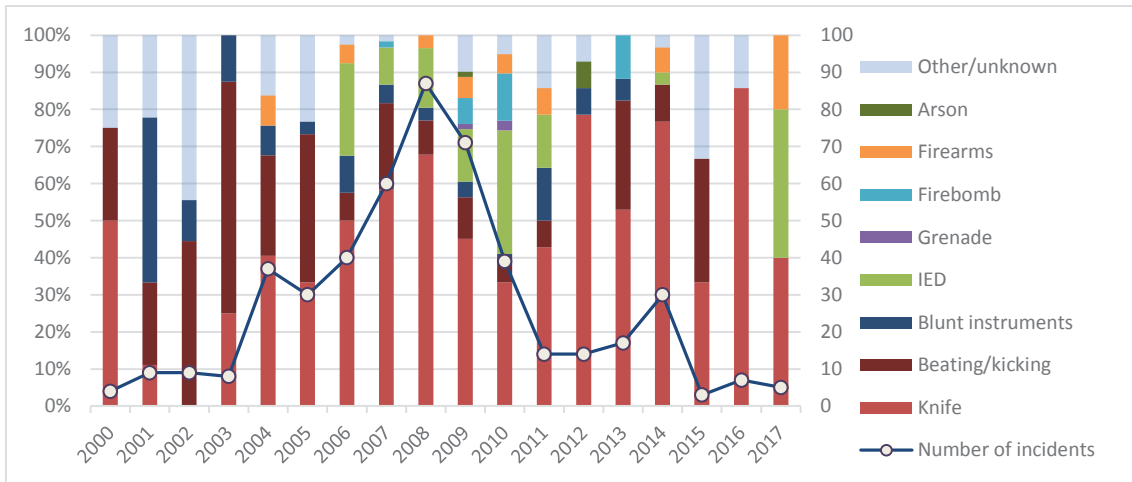
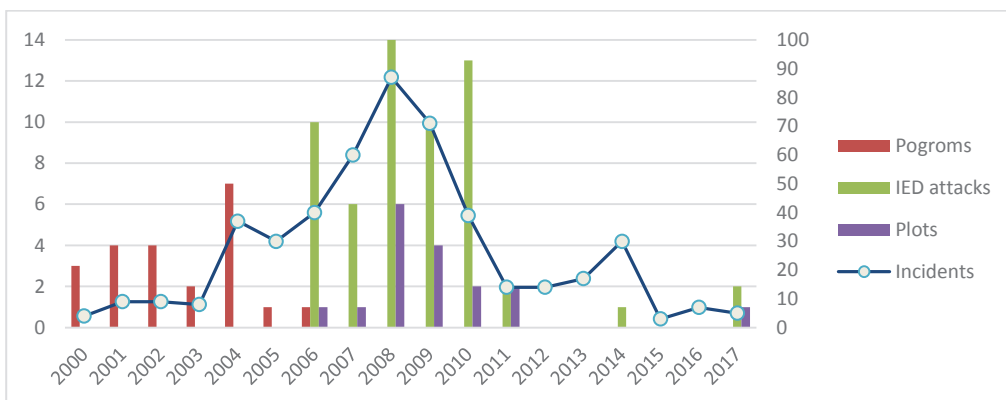


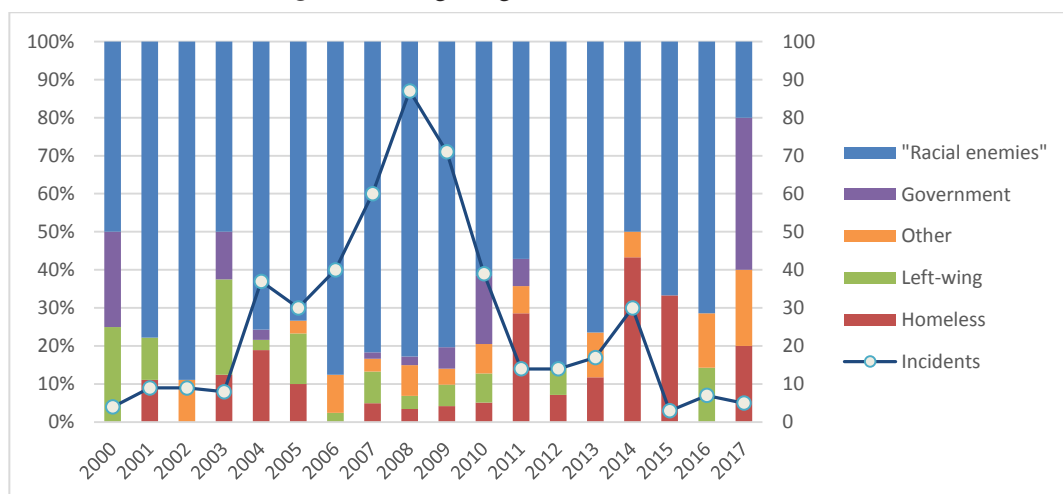
Figure 7 shows the number of pogroms (large-scale attacks involving dozens of activists, typically targeting marketplaces operated by immigrants, concerts attended by left-wingers, or dormitories inhabited by labor migrants), IED attacks, and plots, together with the overall number of events. Pogroms were a main feature of skinhead violence in the late 1990s and early 2000s, but then ceased to occur after 2006, whereupon we see a six-year wave of IED attacks and plots, rising and falling with the overall tide of violence.

Figure 7. Pogroms, IED Attacks, Plots, and Number of Events, 2000-2017 (all Events)



As for targeting dynamics (Figure 8), “racial enemies” have remained the dominant category throughout the entire period. Moreover, the share of attacks targeting homeless persons appears to have increased somewhat in the years after 2010. Looking at government targets, most of these attacks (15 of 20) occurred in the period 2006-2011.

Figure 8. Targeting, 2000-2017 (all Events)



Development over Time: A Historian’s Explanation

Looking at the data presented above, a historian’s natural question would be: Why did this major wave of violence occur when it did? The following section tries to answer that question by presenting a three-phase periodization of the period 2000-2018, taking into account causal factors along the way that help explain the rise and fall of violence. For the uptick in violence, those factors include: the birth and growth of a Russian right-wing skinhead subculture in the 1990s; ideological radicalization fueled by immigration-related grievances and the closing of political opportunities; and the deliberate exploitation of new technology (the internet and mobile recording devices). As for the subsequent fall in the level of violence, key factors include increased attention by law enforcement agencies and internal division in the nationalist movement.

Trouble Brewing: The Chaotic 1990s

The 1990s was a turbulent decade for the Russians, with economic crisis, rampant crime, and separatist tendencies tearing at the country’s seams. Moreover, the Soviet Union had perished along with a whole system of officially sanctioned norms and values, leaving an identity vacuum. Struggling to maintain order, the new political authorities lacked popular trust. This kind of situation, as political psychologist Karen Stenner has demonstrated, amounts to a normative threat that inevitably activates intolerant attitudes in a large part of any population.[13] And indeed: Ethnic nationalism now emerged as a potent force to fill the void left by the Soviet system’s implosion. In the words of one expert on Russian nationalism, the post-Soviet years witnessed “Russia’s ethnic renaissance”, and the new infatuation with ethnicity carried undertones of racism, with talk of the Russian nation’s “biological victimization”.[14] At the same time, labor migrants (legal and illegal ones) from Central Asian countries and the Caucasus were becoming increasingly visible in Russian cities, adding to the sense of normative threat.[15]

Under such circumstances, it is not hard to understand why many young people were drawn to gangs for protection, status, and a sense of belonging. The right-wing skinhead subculture, which made its first inroads among Russian youth in the early 1990s, offered a story about national identity as well: We are Russians, we are Slavs, we are Whites, and this is our country; we must come together to fight the enemies that threaten to replace, dilute, and destroy us. As one influential ideological manifesto, published in 2000, put it: “Skinheads are white warriors, soldiers of their race and nation. They stand on the frontlines of the racial battle, fighting every day for the future of the white race and the happiness of their people.”[16] By the end of the 1990s, the right-wing skinhead subculture and its associated forms of style and behavior had become an entrenched social phenomenon in Russian society. Its adherents were committing an increasing number of violent attacks.

Phase One (2000-2004): Skinhead Onslaught

The situation at the turn of the millennium, then, was one of escalating militant activism with skinhead gangs as the main type of perpetrator. As shown in Figure 7, the characteristic attack in the years 2000-2004 was the pogrom, with large groups of skinheads descending on marketplaces, migrant dormitories, and left-wing concerts. Notably, two major pogroms hit Moscow's outdoor markets in 2001. The first, in April, involved as many as 300 attackers armed with knives, metal bars, and sticks. At least ten persons were severely injured and hospitalized; dozens of stalls and kiosks were destroyed. Another pogrom, in October 2001, first targeted a marketplace near the Tsaritsyno metro station. The violence soon spread to other metro stations and to a hostel housing Afghan refugees. At least 300 skinheads reportedly took part in the attack, killing four persons and injuring 80.[17]

In a 2002 edition of the neo-Nazi samizdat magazine *Gnev Peruna* [The Wrath of Perun], a leading activist wrote an article defending the pogrom as a form of political activism. Apparently, some critics inside the movement had thought it a misguided tactic, indiscriminate, often harming ordinary Russians. Not so, argued "Schulz", who saw pogroms (and similar "smashing actions") as "fitting in with the concept of direct action—right-wing terror". Moreover, "our hearts become filled with joy [...] when Russian youth demonstrate their healthy, aggressive instincts." [18] While the skinheads' violence at this point would usually be interpreted as a form of "hooliganism" by Russian media and courts of law, it is interesting to note that leaders of early-2000s skinhead groups explicitly saw themselves as engaged in a campaign of terrorism and direct action.

The Tsaritsyno pogrom in particular received wide coverage in the Russian media, leading to the establishment of a special police department for combating youth extremism, a problem that authorities had largely denied or played down so far.[19] While journalists framed the perpetrators as hooligans, misfits, degenerates, and generally the scum of society, their reports likely also had the unintended effect of attracting new adherents to the movement—for the right-wing militants, all PR was good PR. According to some estimates, the number of people active in the skinhead subculture increased from about two thousand in 1999 to thirty-five or forty thousand in 2002, then making another jump to seventy thousand by 2004.[20]

Phase Two (2004-2011): Enter Revolutionary Terrorism

The year 2004 marked an intensification of what became a major wave of right-wing violence in Russia (note, however, that part of the jump in registered events from 2003 to 2004 likely reflects the beginning of more systematic data gathering by the SOVA Center), peaking in 2008 and receding to pre-2004 levels by 2011. Of all the registered right-wing killing events in the entire eighteen-year period, 75% occurred during this phase. The period also witnessed the decline of traditional skinhead gangs and the large-scale pogrom as an attack form, as well as the emergence of better organized groups of perpetrators, including smaller, clandestine groups engaging in a leaderless resistance-style of revolutionary terrorism (see Figure 5). Tactics became more diversified, with IEDs and firearms supplementing the (still popular) cold weapons and unarmed attacks (see Figure 6).

A combination of factors brought on the radicalization of right-wing militancy in this period, and central among them was ideological development.[21] Key activists began to make the case for revolutionary terrorism. In a 2004 edition of the extreme-right zine *Russkaia Volia* (Russian Will), one of the most influential of its kind and distributed widely in extreme-right milieus across the country, an article appeared entitled "Theory of Revolutionary Terror (A Guide to Action)". It was signed by "Max18", later to be revealed as Maksim Bazylev. Bazylev had joined the skinhead movement in the late 1990s and would later play a key role in the National Socialist Society (NSO), one of the most murderous neo-Nazi organizations of post-Soviet Russia, before he died while in pre-trial detention in 2009. His article featured a detailed argumentation in favor of revolutionary terrorism that went as follows: 1) The Russian state is pursuing policies that run counter to the interests of the Russian people, policies that result in an artificial decrease in the native population and their replacement by alien ethnic groups; thus, a change of power is the only solution. 2) A nationally oriented opposition movement may theoretically gain power by legal means. 3) In the authoritarian police state of Putin's Russia, however, such legal means of gaining power have been closed off. 4) Therefore, revolutionary struggle is the most promising

way forward, with activists destabilizing the regime by way of political terror and propaganda.[22]

In his piece, which was “particularly recommended for copying and distributing”, posted on the web, and reprinted in other neo-Nazi zines,[23] Bazylev called on activists to engage in terrorism to destabilize the state, to sow fear among the nation’s enemies, and, most importantly, as a means of propaganda—to popularize revolutionary ideas through violence (“propaganda of the deed”). Because centralized structures would not be able to escape the watchful eyes of the police state, Bazylev recommended a decentralized form of activism. As he reiterated in a 2005 interview with another extreme-right journal, the national struggle in Russia would take shape “as a decentralized partisan movement, represented by autonomous groups of enthusiasts who carry out acts of propaganda and terrorism.”[24] Bazylev was no doubt inspired by American white nationalist Louis Beam’s writings on the strategy of leaderless resistance. He also cited the Brazilian left-wing revolutionary Carlos Marighella, author of the *Minimanual of the Urban Guerrilla* (1969), and referred to the Iraqi insurgency against the U.S.-led presence there as an example of how a movement with an amorphous structure can harass and destabilize an occupation power.

When Bazylev called for revolutionary terrorism in 2004, he was tapping into, and reinforcing, an already developing current rather than setting off something entirely new. Already the year before, in 2003, the first serious, clandestine right-wing terrorist group had been formed in St. Petersburg, the so-called BTO, or Combat Terrorist Organization. Its members purposefully shed the typical skinhead uniform, refrained from using mobile phones and metro smart cards to avoid detection, planned their actions carefully, obtained and used firearms, and robbed post offices to finance their activities.[25] In the course of 2004, several high-profile attacks occurred. In May, an assassination attempt targeted a federal judge presiding over a case against members of a neo-Nazi group; in June, BTO activists assassinated Nikolai Girenko, an expert witness in several trials against right-wing extremists; in August, another federal judge, also presiding over a neo-Nazi case, was assassinated.[26] Bazylev’s article, then, offered ideological justification, direction, and purpose for an already emerging trend. Much of the violence in the Phase Two years appeared to follow the recipe described in the “Theory of Revolutionary Terror”.

Ideological radicalization within the movement was fueled by developments in the larger social and political environment. Grievances related to migration from Central Asia and the Caucasus continued to intensify in the mid-2000s. As the Russian economy improved, the number of officially registered labor migrants surged from 213,000 in 2000 to 460,000 in 2004, peaking at 2.4 million in 2008.[27] A sizable number of illegal migrants should be added on top of these figures. In 2008, Moscow officials stated that as many as 3 million illegal migrants might be residing in the capital alone.[28] The increasing presence of ethnic others, along with major terrorist attacks (e.g., the Moscow theater hostage crisis in 2002 and the Moscow metro bombings in 2004) and other crimes attributed to migrants, fueled nationalist sentiment in the population at large and became a cause for mobilization on the militant right. By 2007, the Russian Interior Ministry was putting the number of skinheads at 100,000 or more, although figures such as these should be taken with a grain of salt.[29] At the same time, Putin’s authoritarian regime continued to close off opportunities for real political participation except for the “tamed” parliamentary opposition, leading many right-wing activists to the conclusion that revolutionary terrorism was the only way forward.[30]

While restrictive in the parliamentary sense, Russian politics in the mid-2000s simultaneously created a permissive environment for right-wing militants in a discursive sense—by exploiting ethnic hostility as an electoral resource. The party Rodina, for instance, in late 2005 ran a televised election campaign video with the message “let us clean Moscow of garbage”, obviously referring to migrants of non-Russian ethnicity. The SOVA Center concluded that “the December 2005 elections in Moscow demonstrated an unprecedented sharp growth of radical xenophobia in the Russian capital—and possibly, in the entire country.”[31] Perhaps not incidentally, the subsequent year saw a drastic increase in right-wing homicide events.

Ideological radicalization, large-scale immigration, and shrinking political space for oppositional nationalists amid a permissive discursive environment for extremists: this confluence of factors arguably goes a long way towards explaining the wave of violence that occurred in Phase Two.

In addition to ideology, migration, and politics, technology most likely mattered. The mid-2000s was a time of rapidly increasing internet penetration in Russia. According to Internet Live Stats, the number of internet users doubled from six million in 2002 (4% of the population) to twelve million in 2003, then doubling once more to twenty-five million in 2006, and so on.[32] Moreover, in the mid-2000s camera phones were becoming ubiquitous, with video recordings a simple affair. The first incidents of deadly right-wing violence in which perpetrators filmed their attacks began to appear around 2006, multiplying thereafter. Such recordings had a dual function: internally, they were a tool for enhancing one's status in the eyes of other activists or the wider milieu of right-wing militants. Externally, the clips would showcase extreme-right activism for a wider audience, thus constituting a technologically updated form of "propaganda of the deed". Beginning in 2006, a group called Format 18 began to collect and distribute such recordings (online as well as on DVDs).[33] These new opportunities for spreading violent propaganda and gaining a measure of "fame" were seized upon by many activists across the country.

Phase Three (2011-2018): Decline in Violence

By 2011 the annual number of violent events had dropped to pre-2004 levels, marking the beginning of the third phase. Two factors help explain the decline in violence. First, and most important, authorities began to deal more seriously and effectively with the issue of extreme-right violence. As the murders multiplied, sometimes targeting high-profile victims, police devoted more resources to tracking down the perpetrators. Toward the end of the 2010s, an increasing number of perpetrators were being arrested and put on trial; many were handed life sentences (in 2010, a record 297 violent perpetrators were convicted, up from 130 the year before and 65 in 2007).[34] As a result, the risk associated with engaging in right-wing violence grew.

Another salient factor appears to be that leading activists began to realize that killing "racial enemies" in the streets did not make their grievances go away. The militants could blow up a marketplace here, torch a police station there—but their actions did not destabilize the state. If the "theory of revolutionary terrorism" looked nice on paper, it certainly failed in practice.[35]

In the years after 2014, the level of violent events has remained low. To understand why, it is useful to consider the dynamics resulting from the 2014 events in Ukraine. The revolution in Kiev, the Russian invasion and occupation of Crimea, and the establishment of Russian-backed "people's republics" in eastern Ukraine led to a major split in the Russian nationalist movement as a whole. While one part supported the Russian intervention and bought into the Kremlin narrative of what was going on (an anti-Russian coup carried out by Ukrainian fascists), the other part interpreted the shift of power in Kiev as a "revolution of dignity" against a corrupt regime under Kremlin influence. Those who opposed the Russian intervention in Ukraine and called for a Maidan revolution in Moscow (these were usually the most radical nationalists, neo-Nazis and other militants) have encountered strong state pressure in the years after 2014, with several leaders jailed or forced into emigration. This likely helps explain the low level of activism after 2014, as measured both by the number of violent events and the size of nationalist demonstrations such as the annual Russian March. The violent intensity of the 2000s appears to have petered out.[36]

The East-West Variation: A Comparative Explanation

The historical explanation offered above goes a long way to answer the question of why the wave of right-wing violence in Putin's Russia occurred when it did. The findings presented in the first section raise another important question as well: Why have Russian right-wing militants operated so much more violently than their Western counterparts (see Figure 1)? Addressing this question calls for a comparative approach.

Attempts to explain cross-national variation in right-wing terrorism and violence have long been hampered by the lack of systematic, reliable, and comparable event data, but recent advances in the field have provided a new, and more solid, basis for comparison. In particular, Ravndal's qualitative comparative analysis of the RTV dataset yielded two combinations of factors, or "causal recipes", that appeared to produce high levels of right-

wing violence in Western European countries in the period 1990-2015. The first recipe, valid for Northern Europe, consisted of a combination of high immigration, low support for radical-right parties, and high public stigmatization of radical-right actors and opinions. In the second recipe, valid for Southern Europe, high violence levels resulted from a combination of socioeconomic hardship, authoritarian pasts, and extensive left-wing violence.[37] Ravndal's QCA analysis included only one regime type: Western European liberal democracies. Given that Russia is not a liberal democracy, we should not expect the case to fit neatly into the mentioned explanatory patterns. And indeed, as it turns out, none of the two "recipes" seems to explain the Russian case, even though some of the factors are applicable. A third, Russian recipe appears necessary.

A combination of four key factors arguably accounts for Russia's divergence vis-à-vis the West: Anocratic regime type, high violence levels in society, high immigration, and low social stigmatization of far-right views.

First, the regime type of Putin's Russia—neither an autocracy nor democracy, but rather an anocracy in which the government seriously skews the political playing field yet is not willing to crush all dissent—has been found to present "an ideal environment for terrorism". By contrast, terrorism occurs the least in both full democracies and in strict autocracies.[38] Second, Russia has more violence in general. Russian homicide rates (2010 figures) exceeded those of Western countries by a factor of ten to fifteen (note that the rate was even higher in the 1990s and early 2000s),[39] and estimated domestic violence rates strongly exceed those found in the West. The high rates reflect a society in which violence is more accepted and the threshold for using violence is lower.[40] Third, Putin's Russia saw high immigration from non-Slavic regions such as Central Asia and the Caucasus.[41] The tide of labor migrants in the mid-2000s was a key mobilizing issue for the extreme right; it is hard to imagine the wave of violence without it. Fourth, lower social stigmatization of extreme-right views such as racism limited the social costs of taking part in extreme-right activism: Russian activists generally did not expect to be scorned, attacked, and discredited for their views as much as their Western European counterparts did.[42] (Note that in Ravndal's Northern European causal recipe, high stigmatization helped produce more, not less, right-wing violence. Given the principle of equifinality (multiple paths leading to the same outcome),[43] such an apparent discrepancy should not be surprising.)

Conclusion

For a long time, research on terrorism and political violence failed to register post-Soviet Russia as a prominent case of right-wing terrorism. This article has tried to fill that gap by providing an overview of modus operandi and proposing two explanations to account for the wave of right-wing violence occurring in the 2000s and the higher level of such violence compared to Western countries.

Having introduced and analyzed the new RTV-RUSSIA dataset to explore the militants' modus operandi, three main findings deserve highlighting. First, Russian activists have operated much more violently compared to their counterparts in the United States and Western Europe. In Russia, for the period 2000-2017, the frequency of right-wing homicide events (per capita per year) exceed five-fold that of the U.S., four-fold that of Germany, and two-fold that of Sweden. Second, Russian activists have operated more purposefully, with premeditated attacks vastly outnumbering spontaneous ones. A third notable finding concerns perpetrator types. While gangs and unorganized groups, as in the case of Western Europe, have been the most common perpetrators, the overall share of lone actors has been much lower than in the West (even though it appears to have been rising in later years).

The data show that a wave of right-wing terrorism and violence occurred in Russia in the 2000s. The violence peaked in the late 2000s, and has remained at a low level since 2014. Why did this wave occur when it did? This question demanded a historical explanation, by which several factors were highlighted: the crisis-ridden 1990s and the rise of the skinhead subculture as a vital precondition; ethno-nationalist grievances related to the increasing influx of labor migrants from Central Asia and the Caucasus; ideological radicalization among key activists; the Putin regime's closing off of political opportunities for oppositional nationalists; a permissive discursive environment for right-wing extremists; and rapidly increasing internet penetration along with the

availability of camera phones enabling activists to seek status and gain a wider audience by recording their deeds and sharing them online.

Why has Russia seen so much more right-wing violence compared to Western Europe in the period since 1990? This question prompted a comparative approach. Following Ravndal's recent research on cross-national variation of right-wing terrorism and violence in Western Europe, which suggested two different "causal recipes" valid for Northern and Southern Europe, this article has proposed a third recipe to explain the Russian divergence. The Russian recipe involves a combination of anocratic regime type (neither fully democratic nor totally repressive), a more brutalized society (Russia has much higher rates of homicide and domestic violence compared to Western countries), high immigration of ethnic "others", and relatively low public stigmatization of extreme-right views.

The explanations proposed above largely deal with macro-level factors. Yet the Russian case obviously also offers a wealth of empirical material to researchers interested in meso- and micro-level causes of right-wing terrorism and violence. Looking ahead, it should be the task of future research to delve deeper into the Russian situation, carrying out interviews with (former) activists, collecting court documents, studying activists' publications, and exploring other available sources in order to uncover the social, psychological, and ideological forces driving this phenomenon, bringing the findings to bear on the field's current theories and hypotheses.

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Notes

- [1] Major contributions by Tore Bjørgo and others arrived too early to be able to consider the Russian case, cf. Tore Bjørgo and Rob Witte, *Racist Violence in Europe* (New York: Macmillan Press, 1993); Tore Bjørgo, ed., *Terror from the Extreme Right* (London: Frank Cass, 1995). *The 2011 Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* includes a comprehensive bibliography with a separate subsection for Russia, but lists no entries dealing with right-wing violence. See Alex P. Schmid, (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Terrorism Research* (New York: Routledge, 2011). Moreover, searches for relevant keywords such as "Russia" and "right-wing" in the journals *Terrorism & Political Violence*, *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, and *Perspectives on Terrorism* yielded no relevant results except a single article by the current author.
- [2] See Mihai Varga, "How Political Opportunities Strengthen the Far Right: Understanding the rise in far-right militancy in Russia," *Europe-Asia Studies* 60, no. 4 (2008): 561–579; Richard Arnold, "'Thugs with Guns': Disaggregating 'Ethnic Violence' in the Russian Federation," *Nationalities Papers* 37, no. 5 (2009): 641–664; Richard Arnold, "Visions of Hate: Explaining Neo-Nazi Violence in the Russian Federation," *Problems of Post-Communism* 57, no. 2 (3 April 2010): 37–49; Richard Arnold, Matthew Light, and Gavin Slade, "Systematic racist violence in Russia between 'hate crime' and 'ethnic conflict,'" *Theoretical Criminology* 19, no. 2 (2015): 239–256; Alexander Verkhovsky, "Radical Nationalists from the Start of Medvedev's Presidency to the War in Donbas: True till Death?" in *The New Russian Nationalism*, ed. by Pal Kolstø and Helge Blakkisrud (Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 75–103; Mihai Varga, "Russia's Far-Right Violence Wave: Tracing the Development of Terror in a National-Socialist Organization," *Problems of Post-Communism* (2017). Online first <https://doi.org/10.1080/10758216.2017.1389613>: 1–11.
- [3] See <http://www.sova-center.ru/en/xenophobia/reports-analyses/>.
- [4] Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Introducing the RTV Dataset," *Perspectives on Terrorism* 10, no. 3 (14 June 2016).
- [5] The SOVA database is accessible at <http://www.sova-center.ru/database/>. While systematic data gathering began in 2004, the database includes a number of entries for 2003 as well. For the years 2000–2002, the author has relied on information gathered from secondary literature and news reports.
- [6] U.S. figures are taken from the U.S. Extremist Crime Database. See Joshua D. Freilich et al., "Introducing the United States Extremist Crime Database (ECDB)," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 26, no. 2 (April 2014): 372–384.

- [7] For Western Europe figures, see Ravndal, “Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe”.
- [8] This article employs the same definitions of perpetrator types as Ravndal’s RTV dataset, namely: “(1) perpetrators acting on behalf of organized groups (known entities with five or more members whose association primarily relies on a strong commitment to right-wing politics), (2) affiliated members of organized groups acting on their own, (3) autonomous cells (clandestine entity of two to four members whose association primarily relies on a strong commitment to right-wing politics), (4) gangs (informal constellations of three or more acquaintances with a general right-wing commitment, but whose loose association primarily relies on social bonds, e.g. skinhead gangs and racist youth gangs), (5) unorganized perpetrators (two or more perpetrators with no known association to any specific right-wing group, cell, or gang), (6) lone actors (single perpetrators who prepare and sometimes also carry out attacks without anyone else knowing about it beforehand), and (7) shadow groups (unresolved attacks claimed by formerly unknown groups).”
- [9] “Racial enemies” include people from Central Asia and the Caucasus (for Russia), black people, Gypsy/Roma, Jews, individuals of non-Slavic appearance (for Russia), and the category of immigrant/foreigner/asylum seeker/refugee.
- [10] The most common perpetrators of physical antisemitic violence (certainly most killings) in Western Europe in the past 15 years have been men of Muslim backgrounds, not right-wing extremists. See Johannes Due Enstad, *Antisemitic Violence in Europe, 2005-2015. Exposure and Perpetrators in France, UK, Germany, Sweden, Denmark and Russia* (Oslo: Center for Research on Extremism/Center for Studies of the Holocaust and Religious Minorities, 2017).
- [11] See Ravndal, “Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe,” 12; Katie Worth, “Lone Wolf Attacks Are Becoming More Common—And More Deadly,” *Frontline*, 14 July 2016; URL: <https://perma.cc/5HGU-BYSP>.
- [12] See “Podrostok-neonatsist gotovil terakt v Moskve,” NEWSru.com, 11 June 2009; URL: <https://perma.cc/2LYC-A7XH>; “Popytka podryva restorana McDonald’s,” SOVA Center, 19 January 2009; URL: <https://perma.cc/76LX-9WG2>; “Vynesen prigovor po delu protiv liderov i aktivistov NNP,” SOVA Center, 20 November 2013; URL: <https://perma.cc/SH8D-HK6D>.
- [13] Karen Stenner, *The Authoritarian Dynamic* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).
- [14] Mark Bassin, *The Gumilev Mystique: Biopolitics, Eurasianism, and the Construction of Community in Modern Russia* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016), 244–245.
- [15] See G. V. Osipov and L. L. Rybakovskii (Eds.), *Demograficheskoe razvitie Rossii v XXI veke* (Moscow: Ekon-Inform, 2009), chapter 4.2, available at URL: <https://perma.cc/NM7E-7FHX>.
- [16] See Viktor Shnirelman, “Ariiskaia Ideologii i Identichnost Skinkhedov,” *Skepsis*, 2010; URL: <https://perma.cc/RQ55-R675>.
- [17] Aleksandr Tarasov, “Natsi-skiny v sovremennoi Rossii,” *Skepsis*, 2004; URL: <https://perma.cc/RK9A-QXQA>; Viktor Shnirelman, “Rasovaia voina’ na gorodskikh ulitsakh,” *Skepsis*, 2010; URL: <https://perma.cc/MKF9-PJ9H>; “Pogromy na moskovskikh rynkakh,” *Memorial*, n.d.; URL: <https://perma.cc/V7RF-D9HU>.
- [18] “Khuliganstvo i Pogromy,” *Gnev Peruna* 5 (2002), 3.
- [19] See Tarasov, “Natsi-Skiny v Sovremennoi Rossii”.
- [20] Hilary Pilkington, Albina Garifzianova, and E. L. Omelchenko, *Russia’s Skinheads: Exploring and Rethinking Subcultural Lives* (London; New York: Routledge, 2010), 8–9.
- [20] Here I concur with Mihai Varga, who similarly stresses the strategic choices of militant leaders for explaining the uptick in violence. See Varga, “Russia’s Far-Right Violence Wave”.
- [22] Max18, “Teoriia Revoliutsionnogo Rerrora (Rukovodstvo k Deistviu),” *Russkaia volia* 8 (2004): 2-15.
- [23] E.g., Straight Edge: Shtorm Chistoi Krovi (2004).
- [24] “Interviu s redaksiiei zhurnala ‘Russkaia volia,’” *Beloe povolzhe* 1 (2005): 14.
- [25] Petr Sidorov, “Beshenye psy Peterburga,” *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 2 June 2006; URL: <https://perma.cc/EN4Z-7XNL>.
- [26] “Pokushenie na sudiu v Dolgoprudnom,” SOVA Center, 25 May 2004; URL: <https://perma.cc/4QSF-G3JD>; “Ubiistvo Nikolaia Girenko v Sankt-Peterburge,” SOVA Center, 19 June 2004; URL: <https://perma.cc/Z9H8-UPMP>; “Ubiistvo sudi v Dolgoprudnom,” SOVA Center, 9 August 2004; URL: <https://perma.cc/DPL2-82JE>.
- [27] See table 5.14 in the *Russian Statistical Yearbook* for 2009, available at URL: <https://perma.cc/H2ZR-7PW7>.
- [28] “Chislo Nelegalnykh Immigrantov v Moskve Sostavliaiet uzhe Chetvert Naseleniia Stolitsy,” *Ekho Moskvy*, 1 April 2008; URL: <https://perma.cc/9DL6-VAM9>.

- [29] Pilkington, Garifzianova, and Omelchenko, Russia's skinheads, 8-9.
- [30] Varga, "How Political Opportunities Strengthen the Far Right". See also Dmitrii Demushkin's statement about repressive politics driving activists into the violent underground in Peter Finn, "Moscow Killings Blamed on Racism," *Washington Post*, 8 April 2008; URL: <https://perma.cc/5YPW-QA95>.
- [31] See Galina Kozhevnikova, "Radical Nationalism and Efforts to Oppose it in Russia in 2005," SOVA Center, 25 February 2006; URL: <https://perma.cc/P4RY-862A>. On the lower level of social stigma attached to extreme-right opinions in Russia, see Johannes Due Enstad, "'Glory to Breivik!': The Russian Far Right and the 2011 Norway Attacks," *Terrorism and Political Violence* 29, no. 5 (2017): 781-783.
- [32] "Russia Internet Users," Internet Live Stats, n.d.; URL: <https://perma.cc/3A49-HDXB>.
- [33] See Vladimir Pribylovskii, "Format-18," *Antikompromat*, n.d.; URL: <https://perma.cc/H7E7-98CR>.
- [34] Statistics on convictions have been compiled by the SOVA Center, see URL: <https://perma.cc/C7HP-ZYH9>.
- [35] Verkhovsky, "Radical Nationalists from the Start of Medvedev's Presidency to the War in Donbas: True till Death?" 84.
- [36] Vera Alperovich, "Eto Fiasko, Gospoda. Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov letom-oseniu 2017 goda," SOVA Center, 26 December 2017; URL: <https://perma.cc/94P6-L66B>.
- [37] Jacob Aasland Ravndal, "Explaining Right-Wing Terrorism and Violence in Western Europe: Grievances, opportunities and polarisation," *European Journal of Political Research* 57, no. 4 (2018): 845-866.
- [38] Khusrav Gaibulloev, James A. Piazza, and Todd Sandler, "Regime Types and Terrorism," *International Organization* 71, no. 3 (2017): 497.
- [39] "Intentional homicides (per 100,000 people)," The World Bank; URL: <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/VC.IHR.PSRC.P5>.
- [40] For substantiation, see Enstad, "'Glory to Breivik!'" 783-784.
- [41] See Ekaterina Shcherbakova, "Migratsiia v Rossii, itogi pervogo polugodiia 2017 goda," *Demoskop Weekly* 743-744 (2017): 22. See also the yearbooks published by Russia's Federal State Statistics Service at URL: http://gks.ru/wps/wcm/connect/rosstat_main/rosstat/ru/statistics/publications/catalog/doc_1135087342078.
- [42] See Enstad, "Glory to Breivik!" 781-783.
- [43] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences* (Cambridge, Mass; London: MIT Press, 2005), 63.