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## Right Wing Terrorism & Hate Crime in the UK: A Historical Perspective



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

by Alex Carter

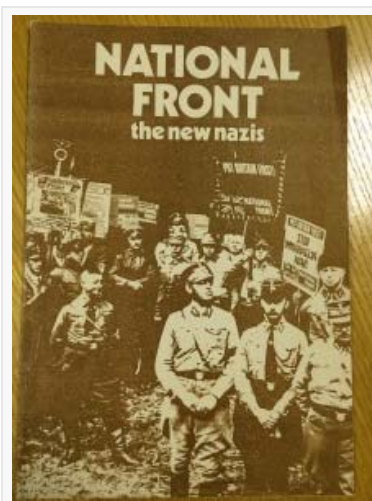
The threat that the far right poses to civil society changes across time and space. In Britain this threat has generally been in the form of hate-crimes and public disorder, yet in the past two decades there has been a shift towards solo-actor terrorism. By examining far right groups in the UK in the post-war period this paper explores the drivers of this change; namely, how membership in extremist groups combined with the proliferation of far right networks created by the internet can create a pathway to radicalisation which ends in acts of terror.

### Political Violence and Hate Crime: The Rise of the British Post-War Far Right

The two most significant far right groups in England in the post-War period have been the National Front (NF), founded in 1967, and the British National Party (BNP), founded in 1982. Between the growth of the former across the 1970s and the decline of the latter since 2009 there have been a largely consistent cycle of street mobilisations, hate crimes and political violence. The NF gained a great deal of publicity by organising many intentionally incendiary marches through areas with large non-white populations with predictable results. The counter-demonstrations were often violent, thereby handing the NF propaganda victories.

Throughout this period, incidents of racially motivated attacks increased. On Friday June 4 1976, **10 year old Gurdip Singh Chaggar** was killed in what has been widely seen as a racially motivated attack. That same month, Community Relations officers in Blackburn released a dossier detailing more than 30 attacks carried out on Asian families and their properties. The officers argued that the blame for these attacks lay with the local National Party (a group created through a schism with the NF in 1975) and their activities.<sup>1</sup> Two Bengali men,

**Altab Ali** and **Ishaque Ali**, were also murdered in East London in April and June 1978 respectively. Similarly, in the 1990s the BNP managed to raise its profile after leading a series of marches, particularly in East London where they had established an HQ, which descended into serious breaches of public order as they clashed with locals and anti-fascists. Further, between 1991 and 1993 three young people of colour (PoC), Rolan Adams, Rohit Duggal and



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## SOCIAL MEDIA



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## TWITTER FEED

CfP: 1. Tagung der Themengruppe Internet und Politik – Elektronische Governance <https://t.co/8nRlb7nywL> #dvpw #powi about 23 hours ago from TweetDeck

The far right in #Austria: small on the streets, big in parliament – by @bweidin <https://t.co/eJFlysyph2> #FarRight #FPÖ 6. April 2016, 10:05 from Twitter Web Client

But – where do these people come from? @oula\_silver writes about the (Re)Emergence of Radical Nationalism in Finland <https://t.co/CK0nDih7e7> 5. April 2016, 11:01 from Twitter Web Client

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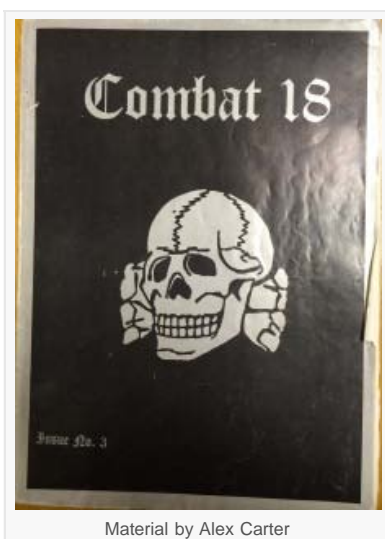
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Stephen Lawrence, **were murdered in the same area**. Even if the murderers were not actually members of the groups, many observers have felt that the incidents were directly linked to the far right parties. Taylor, for instance, argued that hate crimes could not be 'divorced from the presence of the NF in the East End of London, both indirectly in that racism was given a 'legitimate' outlet, and directly insofar as it was alleged that not only were NF members involved in violence but that the NF's leadership was turning a blind eye to such behaviour',<sup>2</sup> the same could easily be said of the BNP.

The main threat to civil society from the presence of the far right in Britain since the 1960s, then, has tended to be public disorder and political violence, rather than acts of terrorism; although there have been some possible exceptions and aborted attempts. In the summer of 1978 a man named Fred Challis and three accomplices were jailed for admitting to 300 racially motivated attacks in Tower Hamlets, as well as the murder of a homeless man. Challis smashed the man's face in with a gas cylinder, before scrawling 'NF rules OK' on the wall in blood; although not actually a member of the NF, Challis felt that the party would appreciate his act. In late 1978 two prominent NF members, James Tierney from Devon and Newcastle branch 'Security Officer' Alan Birtley, were sentenced to three years in prison for the possession of explosives. Birtley admitted in court that several members of his branch were capable of making explosives and they had intended on using them against their political targets.

Further, across the 1980s there were several incidents of far right members collecting or creating materials which could be used for terrorist activities. On November 1 1985 the BNP organiser for Redbridge, Tony Lecomber, was arrested after a homemade explosive device detonated early in his car near to the headquarters of the Workers Revolutionary Party. On March 27 1986 seven Chelsea Football Club supporters were 'remanded in custody after Police raids uncovered an array of National Front (NF) literature, an Ulster Loyalist flag as well as various types of weapons', and on July 1 1986, 'armed Wiltshire police seized a weapons cache, including nine anti-tank rockets and launchers, as well as guns, ammunition and explosives' and arrested a man who had 'extensive links with the extreme Right'.

## Clandestine Political Violence: The Growth of Far Right Terrorism



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These examples notwithstanding, the prospect of real far right acts of terrorism did not emerge until the 1990s. In 1992, a new far right extremist group with openly paramilitary pretensions called Combat 18 (C18) emerged. Throughout the mid-1990s they engaged in a series of violent attacks which was to give them a reputation as a terrorist group. These included firebombing a number of buildings, printing magazines and fanzines with hit-lists containing the names and addresses of left-wing activists, gay clubs, people they saw as 'race

traitors', and later publishing bomb making blueprints with instructions to go out and 'Bomb the Bastards'.

But in 1997 C18 leader Will Browning went further, and arranged for a

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number of letter-bombs to be sent to England from sympathisers in Europe, targeting people for their political affiliations or for being 'race traitors'. Fortunately, acting on information provided by Scotland Yard, Swedish police intercepted the bombs before they could cause any damage. Within a couple of years of their only real attempted terrorist action, the organisations' volatility had led to them all but disintegrating.

Yet just as it seemed the terrorist threat was fading, in April 1999 David Copeland planted three bombs in predominantly non-white and gay areas of London. The bombs seriously injured dozens of people, and killed four, making it the deadliest far right terrorist attack in British history. After his arrest, Copeland **would admit to the police** that his 'aim was political. It was to cause a racial war in this country. There'd be a backlash from the ethnic minorities. I'd just be the spark.'

Copeland has been described as a solo-actor terrorist, as it is all but certain that he planned and carried out his attacks with no-one else's direct involvement. Since this incident, there have been a number of other attempts to commit terrorist attacks by solo-actors with connections to the far right, or who espouse a far right ideology. In June 2008 **Martyn Gilleard** was sentenced to 16 years in prison after police found a wide assortment of weapons, including nailbombs, in his flat, together with a note that read 'I am sick and tired of hearing nationalists talking of killing Muslims, blowing up mosques and fighting back only to see these acts of resistance fail. The time has come to stop the talking and start to act.'<sup>3</sup>

The same year, Nathan Worrell, a member of the Ku Klux Klan, **was imprisoned** for possession of material for terrorist purposes. In the summer of 2009, **Neil Lewington** was convicted for 'planning a racist terror campaign', after police found a 'bomb-making factory' at his home. Lewington had been directly inspired by David Copeland. More recently, **Pavlo Lapshyn** was jailed for 40 years in 2013 for the racially motivated murder of Mohammed Saleem and for planting bombs at three mosques.

## Pathways to Radicalisation: Group Affiliation and the Internet

The threat of far right groups' mobilizations leading to increases in hate crimes and public disorder has by no means waned. Indeed, since the decline of the BNP from 2009 a number of more extreme groups such as National Action and Britain First have emerged. Furthermore, the growth of the so-called counter-jihad movement has seen the formation of groups like the English Defence League (EDL) who are capable of bringing thousands of people out to the streets on protests, and as they do not contest elections they are not susceptible to the moderating effect which often comes along with electioneering.

However, it is the growth of solo-actor terrorists that is not only the newest development in the repertoires of contention of the far right, but also arguably the most worrying aspect of their mobilizations now. A major contribution to this changing pattern of mobilization must be the development and proliferation of the internet. A key **observation from terrorism studies** is that even solo-actor terrorists are rarely entirely acting alone, in that they 'rely on the moral and sometimes tactical support of enablers, which can occur indirectly by people who provide inspiration for political violence.'

The internet has facilitated access to these networks, possibly making pathways to radicalization much easier for potential solo-actor terrorists; while David Copeland made these connections in a face-to-face manner – he

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Wähle den Monat

was a member of the BNP and the National Socialist Movement (NSM) – he nevertheless learned how to make the nail bombs which he used throughout London on the internet. It may now be much easier for people to do both. Far right sites such as the Gates of Vienna and Stormfront allow for networks of international scope to be developed, through which ideas and tactics may be shared. According to **research carried out by the Southern Poverty Law Centre**, registered users of the Stormfront website have been involved in over 100 murders, giving the site the dubious honour of being the ‘murder capital of the internet’.

It should also be borne in mind that membership in extremist organisations can put people on the path to radicalisation which may end in terrorism. The social psychologists Clark McCauley and Sophia Moskalkenko describe a mechanism of radicalization called “group polarization”, whereby groups of people in discussion of ‘risk taking or political opinion consistently show ... a shift in the average opinion of group members toward increased extremism’ in the direction of the general consensus prior to the discussion. So, membership in, and frequent contact with, an extremist group can not only lead to ‘an internalized shift toward more extreme opinions’, but also a deeper understanding of ideologies which justify violence.<sup>4</sup> However, whereas McCauley and Moskalkenko apply this model to explain group radicalization, the foregoing discussion provides at least some evidence that this can happen in an uneven manner, leading to the development of solo-actors who become more radicalized than others in their group. Most of the solo-actors mentioned above had been, or were, members of extremist groups, such as the BNP, KKK and NSM, who were not pursuing a terrorist agenda. This is backed-up by testimony from the editor of far right monitoring magazine Searchlight, Gerry Gable, who argued that David Copeland’s involvement with the BNP facilitated exposure to more extreme hate-materials, thereby directing him down the path to terrorism.


## Conclusion

It seems that the combination of contact with extremist groups and the new freedom of access to ‘networks of support’ provided by the internet is a key factor in the relatively recent growth of far right terrorism in Britain. In 2012 the British Government’s Home Affairs Committee **released a report** on the ‘Roots of Violent Radicalisation’, in which they stated that they had ‘received persuasive evidence about the potential threat from extreme far right terrorism’,<sup>5</sup> and the foregoing discussion reinforces this view. While public disorder and hate crimes remain a very real threat, there is clearly a need for analysts to be more sensitive to the possible pathways to terrorism which engagement with the far right can lead to.



**Alex Carter** is a PhD candidate at Teesside University, where he is researching the dynamic of ‘cumulative extremism’. Alex received his Bachelor’s degree in Politics from Kingston University and his Master’s degree in Nationalism and Ethnic Conflict from Birkbeck College, University of London. Alex is affiliated with Teesside University’s Centre for the Study of Fascism, Anti-Fascism and Post-Fascism (CFAPS).

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1. Walker, Martin (1977): The National Front. Glasgow: Fontana Paperbacks, p.199. 
2. Taylor, Stan. (1982): The National Front in English Politics. Macmillan Press

Ltd, p.156 [↗](#)

3. *The Independent*, July 4, 2008, p.14 [↗](#)
4. McCauley, Clark and Moskalenko, Sophia. (2011) *Friction: How Radicalisation Happens to Them and Us*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 103-105 [↗](#)
5. House of Commons Home Affairs Committee, *Roots of Violent Radicalisation*, 6 February 2012, p.20 [↗](#)

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