15 May 2015

Right-Wing Terrorism in Germany and Beyond

Daniel Koehler believes that right-wing terrorism is a unique form of political violence. As his analysis of the German DTGrwx dataset confirms, it's a type of violence that's carried out by well-defined actors who use specific methods to target distinct types of victims.

By Daniel Koehler for ISN

After the discovery of the German right-wing terrorist group National Socialist Underground (NSU) in 2011, which allegedly assassinated at least 10 people, committed two bombings, and went completely undetected over the course of 14 years, right-wing terrorism has received greater international attention. In the same year, the attacks by Anders Behring Breivik caused 77 casualties. Compared to Jihadist, separatist or anarchist terrorism however, terrorist activities by the extreme right remain under-researched. In recent decades, only a small number of academic studies focus exclusively on right-wing terrorism. In part, thedifferentiation between hate crime and terrorism has created problems in defining and identifying right-wing terrorism. Due to the lack of research regarding the nature of right-wing terrorism, statistics about the phenomenon vary massively. The Global Terrorism Database, for example, lists 103 terrorist incidents perpetrated by right wing extremists or neo-Nazis between 1992 and 2008 in Germany, causing six casualties and injuring 98 people. By contrast, the Database on Terrorism in Germany: Right-Wing Extremism (DTGrwx), hosted by the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS), reports a significantly higher number of cases.[1]

This article provides an overview of some of the main characteristics of right-wing terrorism in Germany and compares it with other well-known incidents in Europe and North America in order to assess the implications for security policy. Based on the DTGrwx, right-wing terrorism in Germany tends to be carried out by certain types of actors, using distinct methods and targeting distinct types of victims. In many respects, these features resemble those of right-wing terrorism throughout Europe and North America. This suggests that right-wing terrorism may indeed be a distinct form of political violence – one that poses a unique challenge for security policy.

Right-wing terrorism in Germany

According to the DTGrwx, the main characteristics of German right-wing terrorist operations since 1963 are the following:

- 52% of identifiable actors are between two and nine members in size. An additional 22.7% are lone

actors, meaning that 72.7% of actors are either small cells and groups or lone actors. Only six large associations with more than 100 members are known so far.

- The tactics used by right-wing terrorists mostly include bombings, assassinations, and arson, and only rarely hostage taking or kidnapping. Over the last 50 years bombings have been the tactic of choice, especially since 1990. In earlier decades assassinations and arson were used widely, though this has decreased in the last 20 years. There have, however, been two recent waves of arson attacks against refugee homes – in [the early 1990s](#) [and since 2014](#).

- Target groups have unsurprisingly included 'foreigners', Jews, and 'leftists'. However, until the 2000s government representatives (e.g. police officers, politicians, and military personnel) made up for around half of the identified targets, making democratic governments and their representatives a primary target of right-wing terrorism. Since the 2000s, though, target groups have differentiated more widely.

- The vast majority of actors (70.45%) is active for no longer than a year before either being killed, detected and arrested by the authorities or disbanding. It seems, however, that if an actor 'survives' for more than a year, its chances of long-term activity significantly increase, with 12.5% being active between one and five years and 13.64% for more than five years.

- One of the most distinctive aspects of right-wing terrorism in Germany is the lack of public communication regarding the attack, e.g. through letters, statements, and communiqués. If only those actors who carried out attacks (successfully and unsuccessfully) are counted (45.45% of all actors in the database) only 25% use any kind of identifying mechanism. In general, public statements by right-wing terrorist actors only rarely contain concrete political claims or programs. In most cases swastikas or similar symbols and statements disparaging the victims or target groups were found at the crime scene.

Parallels with right-wing terrorism elsewhere

Compared with other widely known acts of right-wing terrorism in Europe and North America, several striking similarities are evident. Many incidents outside Germany were also a) carried out by individuals or small groups, b) involved explosives, and c) targeted 'foreigners', 'Jews', or government representatives. The [bombing of the Bologna train station in Italy on 2 August 1980](#), for instance, which killed 85 and wounded more than 200, was carried out by two members of [Nuclei Armati Rivoluzionari (NAR) – a splinter cell of the right-wing terrorist group Ordine Nuove.](#) Similarly, the devastating attack on the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City on 19 April 1995, which [remains one of the most lethal terrorist attacks in the history of the Unite](#)d States, was carried out by Timothy McVeigh and two accomplices using a car bomb. In planning the attack McVeigh was also inspired by the explicitly [racist and anti-Semitic](#) Turner Diaries, which has been called "a bible of the extremist right".

Neo-Nazism is also a common theme among right-wing terrorist actors outside Germany. Four years after the Oklahoma City attacks, in April 1999, the British neo-Nazi David Copeland orchestrated [three nail bomb attacks in 13 days in London](#), causing 3 casualties and wounding 137. Copeland was a long-time member of several neo-Nazi organizations in England and targeted homosexuals and immigrants with his attacks. Another (foiled) attempt of right-wing terrorism became public in the United Kingdom in 2009, when the neo-Nazi Ian Davison and his son (as part of the right-wing terrorist organization 'Aryan Strike Force') planned attacks with chemical weapons, manufacturing [a large amount of the poison ricin](#). On 5 August 2011, the US neo-Nazi Wade Michael Page also [fatally shot six and injured four during an attack at a Sikh temple in Oak Creek, Wisconsin](#).

More recent incidents of right-wing terrorism have targeted government representatives. On July 22, 2011, the Norwegian Anders Behring Breivik [detonated a car bomb in Oslo city centre and drove to the island of Utøya to continue his attack with a mass shooting](#). Causing 77 casualties in total, Breivik

had previously published a manifesto explaining his ideology, which was based on Christian fundamentalism and cultural racism. Attempting to save Norway from a perceived attack by Islam, Breivik was trying to kill members of the Social Democratic Party – which he held responsible for Norway's growing multiculturalism and for undermining Norway's traditional 'culture' and 'race'. Directly influenced by Breivik, a Polish university researcher and two aides were arrested in 2012 for planning to detonate a four ton bomb in front of the Polish parliament building in Warsaw. Motivated by nationalism and anti-Semitism, the small group was allegedly trying to copy Breivik's attack in Poland.

A unique form of political violence?

Based on the DTGrwx dataset, right-wing terrorism in Germany seems to closely resemble other well-known incidents of right-wing terrorism in Europe and North America. This suggests that it may be worth treating right-wing terrorism as a phenomenon distinct from other forms of political violence. Right-wing terrorism has traditionally operated using very small groups, cells and lone actors to target mainly 'foreigners', 'Jews,' and government representatives by mainly using explosives and targeted assassinations. Moreover, these attacks, which mostly do not attempt to inflict indiscriminate mass casualties (a tactic which nevertheless seems to gain more attention), have only very rarely been accompanied by some form of public communication. This indicates that right-wing terrorists may not need or want to communicate their course of action to a potential audience. Indeed, many right-wing attacks may be considered 'self explanatory' by their perpetrators, or are successful in creating fear and terror within the target group without anyone claiming responsibility for the attack.

It may be that violence is simply an inherent part of right-wing extremist ideology and thus not perceived by the perpetrators as requiring explanation. This raises the danger of attacks being dismissed as unplanned, erratic, spontaneous or isolated incidents. The findings above suggest that this is not the case. Right-wing terrorism is a dangerous form of political violence and a legitimate threat precisely because it frequently aims to blend in with society in order to minimize repression and counter-measures and to more effectively pursue its goals.

---

[1] The DTGrwx currently contains information on: 123 right-wing terrorist incidents using explosives, 2,173 right-wing arson attacks, 229 cases of murder with a right-wing motive, 12 kidnappings, 56 cases of extortion, and 174 armed robberies perpetrated by right-wing offenders since 1971. In addition the database contains qualitative and quantitative data on currently 88 identified right-wing terrorist groups and individuals. Both successful and unsuccessful attacks are included.

Daniel Koehler is the Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS) . His research focus lies on right-wing terrorism, radicalization and de-radicalization. He has studied religious studies, political science and economics at Princeton University and the Freie Universität Berlin

---

Publisher

[International Relations and Security Network (ISN)](#)

For more information on issues and events that shape our world, please visit the [ISN Blog](#) or browse our [resources](#).