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THE JOURNAL OF RIGHT-WING STUDIES

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In the five months since the Trump administration has come to power, people are absorbing its insults to liberal democracy, to individual and collective rights, in a way that recalls Victor Klemperer's day-by-day tally of the mounting web of restrictions on Jews in 1930s Germany. Media, universities, law firms, judges, and others are finding themselves forced into concessions in the face of sometimes existential threats. In a particularly vile irony, ideological extortion of universities has proceeded by defining free-speech criticism of Israel's war crimes in Gaza as "antisemitism." Authoritarianism's red line was crossed when immigrants and foreign students were whisked off streets into often distant detention, including in proudly displayed concentration-camp-like imprisonment abroad. The deployment of combat Marines to Los Angeles, current as this is written, is an "emergency" foretold. And all this is administered by spectacularly ignorant officials who, for example, have no idea what habeas corpus means. (See Noem, Kristi)

Meantime, the administration is turning back the clock to cancel not merely the reforms and government apparatus that began with the New Deal (which radical free-market Republicans have been after for almost a century); but they are now reaching beyond to cancel the Progressive Era of the turn of the twentieth century, the years that gave Americans the Federal Reserve, the progressive income tax, women's right to vote, and more. Trump's giddy improvisations on tariffs have the aim of returning the US to regressive taxation, yawning economic inequality, and massive corruption and enrichment on the part of oligarchs. Before the Progressive Era, the oligarchs came from emerging industries like railroads, oil, and steel. Today's oligarchs are seizing AI, crypto, and quantum computing; and Trump's personal participation in this primitive accumulation at the dawn of what may be a new economic era is a particularly grotesque and revealing spectacle. Abroad as well, the late nineteenth century model obtains: the US is talking about territorial expansion, raw materials, and the absence of international regulation and law.

Earlier it was called the Gilded Age—oligarchical gold leaf wrapped around an immiserated population. In the opening sentence of his second inaugural address Trump promised that "the golden age of America begins right now." A mere veneer of gold, it seems, is no longer enough.

Trumpism in the USA is the leading example of similar transformations that are either in power around the globe or knocking at the door. In these circumstances the urgency of work in the field of right-wing studies speaks for itself. We are pleased that with this issue of the *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* we are entering our third year of publication. We hope for its wide circulation not only among the expanding number of right-wing studies scholars but among concerned readers everywhere.

Lawrence Rosenthal
June 15, 2025

ARTICLE

The Menace of Globalism

Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960

ALEX MCPHEE-BROWNE

King's College, University of Cambridge

Abstract: *In the wake of the October 1929 stock market crash, conservatives formed an array of organizations and publications that aimed to resist the nation's steady embrace of New Deal liberalism. Crucial to their opposition was a group of "nationalist conservatives" whose most prominent member was the operative and propagandist Merwin K. Hart. Hart's worldview, which embraced nativism, antisemitism, anti-interventionism, and economic libertarianism, was shared by a range of figures on the right whose contributions to the emergence of the post-war conservative movement have not been studied. Hart's organization, the New York State Economic Council (later renamed the National Economic Council), played a critical function in propagating conservative ideas throughout the years of liberal political hegemony. Scholarship on conservatism has generally cast the early opponents of the New Deal as principled libertarians, unsullied by bigotry and nativism; this article challenges that picture, arguing that the nationalist conservatives were critical in shaping the ideology of the postwar right.*

Keywords: nationalism, conservatism, twentieth-century US history, intellectual history, antisemitism, nativism, Merwin K. Hart

On a cool autumn evening in November 1939, as a light rain fell across New York City, a crowd of twelve thousand gathered in Madison Square Garden for a patriotic rally. To cheering and the blare of martial music, the star guest, Texas Democratic congressman Martin Dies, mounted the rostrum at 9:30 p.m., escorted by a phalanx of American Legionnaires. Tall and broad, with thin beady eyes and boyish features, the young Dies was a gifted showman, the head of the House Un-American Activities Committee and a central architect of the anticommunist movement of the late 1930s. Dies's speech that night offered an impassioned call to arms, a stark warning of the perils facing America in a world aflame.¹

1 "Dies at Rally Here Warns U. S. to Stop its 'Aping' of Europe," *New York Times*, November 30, 1939, 1; "Dies Asks for Open Stand on Investigations," *Daily Missoulian* (Missoula, MT), November 30,

“Blessed as no other people on earth with all the conditions necessary for economic and intellectual independence,” Dies told his audience, “we hold stubbornly and stupidly to foreign ties which a sound Americanism should have dissolved in all of us.” The nation possessed an economic and political system superior to the best that Europe had to offer, he argued. But the people’s fealty to “Americanism” was under attack, menaced by New Deal measures and a flood of “alien” propaganda.² The great threat facing the nation, Dies believed, was the combination of foreign agitators and those Americans who subscribed to the basic philosophy of society that had produced Stalin and Hitler. This alien creed of bureaucratic state capitalism had its roots in Marxism, he argued, a “pagan religion of materialism” antithetical to the ideals of America’s Christian republic. But the majority of Marxists, he warned, did not belong to any organization. Instead, they masqueraded under the name of “liberals.” They denied, “with technical accuracy,” that they were communists, but the truth was that they worshiped “at the shrine of Marx” and derived their economic and political ideas from his writings.³ Only a wholesale return to the principles of conservatism, Dies believed, could overcome the threat of liberalism. The antidote for the ills of private capitalism was “more capitalism . . . a wider diffusion of private property in order that there may be a firmer foundation for personal liberty.” And the first duty of the republic must be to its own. The nation’s hands were full with the task of preserving the republic from subversive elements within; there was no reason to engage in foreign expeditions. Above all, Dies declared, looking out across the audience, “we express the firm determination of this great gathering and Americans everywhere in this closing declaration, God gave us America; the Marxists shall not take it away.”⁴

Standing in the crowd that evening, a smile of satisfaction no doubt spread across his lips, was the mastermind of the rally, a shrewd activist and propagandist named Merwin Kimball Hart. Short, with finely wrought features and large, faintly reptilian eyes, Hart was head of the New York State Economic Council, later renamed the National Economic Council, a lobby group opposed to the New Deal and the “creeping socialization” of American life. Hart’s ideology, which combined free-market

1939, 1; “Program: Mass Meeting for America,” n.d. (1939), box 1, folder 20, Merwin K. Hart Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR [hereafter MKHP]. On Dies, see, Dennis Kay McDaniel, “Martin Dies of Un-American Activities: His Life and Times,” (PhD diss., University of Houston, 1988); Kenneth O’Reilly, “The Dies Committee v. the New Deal: Real Americans and the Unending Search for Un-Americans,” in *Little ‘Red Scares’: Anti-Communism and Political Repression in the United States, 1921–1946*, ed. Robert Justin Goldstein (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2014), 237–59.

2 Martin Dies, *The Insidious Wiles of Foreign Influence* (New York: Committee on Mass Meeting for America, 1939), 1–3, box 1, folder 20, MKHP.

3 Dies, 4–5.

4 Dies, 6–8.

conservatism with nativism, nationalism, anticommunism, and antisemitism, formed an influential strain of nationalist conservatism that would rise to prominence throughout the 1940s and 1950s. It was Hart who had organized to have Dies speak, and the congressman's performance thrilled him.⁵

This article examines Hart and his allies and the strain of nationalist conservatism that they represent. It argues that Hart was central, indeed indispensable, to the formation of modern American conservatism after World War II, and that Hart and his allies' revanchist ideology prefigured the rise of figures such as Willis Carto, Robert Welch, and Revilo Oliver, as well as certain conservatives of our own era, whose arguments Hart was among the first to articulate. Hart himself occupied a distinctive place in the conservative movement. A provocateur, whose tirades against the New Deal, communism, Zionism, "internationalism," and "globalism" earned him broad notoriety, Hart maintained close and varied ties with the conservative mainstream. He counted the libertarian activist Leonard Read, the prominent Christian libertarian James W. Fifield Jr., the libertarian polemicist Rose Wilder Lane, and William F. Buckley Jr., the crown prince of postwar conservatism, among his allies, and throughout the 1940s, Hart's organization played host to a string of prominent libertarians and conservatives.⁶ His council, in its various iterations, was crucial to propagating what I call "nationalist conservatism," a fusion of antistatism, and a fervent belief in the virtues of free-market capitalism, with elements of the ideology of the American far right.⁷ Central to this worldview was a tendency toward conspiracism, toward a view of social and political change as orchestrated by an insidious clique of left-wing politicians and intellectuals.

5 "Exchangites Will Hear Hart Speak," *Binghamton (NY) Press*, December 8, 1939, 23; Merwin K. Hart [hereafter MKH], statement, January 22, 1940, box 58, folder 6, George E. Sokolsky Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA [hereafter GESP]; MKH, *Economic Council Letter* [hereafter ECL], no. 134 (June 1945): 2.

6 MKH, "Memo of Talk with Leonard Read," December 6, 1946, in *Hearings Before the House Select Committee on Lobbying Activities, House of Representatives*, pt. 4, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess. (1950) [hereafter *HSCLA*], 203; MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; Fifield to MKH, July 25, 1949, in *HSCLA*, 490.

7 The resurgence in the past eight years, frequently under the banner of "national" conservatism, of a type of nationalistic conservatism that strongly echoes the work of Hart and his allies cannot be examined in depth here. Suffice to say, much of what makes the "national" conservatives and other intellectual fellow travelers of Donald Trump distinctive can be directly traced to the nationalist conservatism of the figures I discuss in this article. I use the term "nationalist conservatism," however, to underline the racist, nativist, and anti-interventionist currents that undergirded Hart and his allies' efforts. Contemporary "national" conservatives, although hardly above appeals to race and nation, have generally approached politics from the standpoint of a critique of the free-market philosophy of Reaganism and the global neoliberal order. As we will see, Hart and his allies were much closer to the Reaganite consensus when it came to economics, although they articulated their ideas decades before that consensus had formed. Finally, the reemergence today, in the popular politics of the Trump-era GOP, of much of what made nationalist conservatism distinctive suggests that the intellectual and political antecedents of Trumpism can be traced at least to the era of the Great Depression.

Conspiracy thinking was hardly unknown among conservatives—then or now—but the nationalist conservatives embraced it fervently, grounding their thought in a racialized master narrative of American decline. Nevertheless, this conspiratorial worldview—this intense suspicion of immigrants, communists, and Jews—did not, at least initially, exclude Hart and his allies from central positions in the nascent conservative movement. As I will show, Hart’s organization functioned for thirty years as a crucial node of conservative thought and praxis, a beacon, of sorts, in the years of conservatism’s travails in the political wilderness.

Of course, nationalist ideology as such was hardly the sole property of the right. Mainstream liberals embraced a “soft” nationalism, adapting and repurposing a variety of nationalist themes throughout the Depression decade and especially after World War II. The US Communist Party, for its part, played with these same nationalist tropes, claiming, in 1938, that their revolutionary doctrine constituted “20th Century Americanism.”⁸ Farther to the right of the nationalist conservatives was an array of “native” fascists, such as William Dudley Pelley’s Silver Legion, who embraced an aggressive nationalism while eschewing the celebration of free-market capitalism. The nationalist conservatives often echoed the fascists. Both ultimately envisioned a purified national community, cleansed of the “alien” other.⁹

The nationalists’ vision of capitalism anchored their ideology, and its fusion with bigotry and extreme nationalism suggests ways in which the current scholarly view of libertarianism might be altered. Too often, movement libertarianism has been cast as antithetical to racism and nationalism, but the historical evidence suggests that this purified libertarianism has never—outside the minds of a handful of individuals—really existed.¹⁰ Hart and his allies viewed free market capitalism as the sine qua non of the American experiment, the system of economic relations by which the nation had assumed preeminent power in world affairs. Like many later libertarians, they viewed the market as a vital tool in disciplining the individual by inculcating the virtues of

8 William Z. Foster, quoted in Harvey Klehr, *The Heyday of American Communism: The Depression Decade* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 222.

9 On Pelley and other “native” fascists, see among others Leo P. Ribuffo, *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1983); Morris Schonbach, *Native American Fascism During the 1930s and 1940s: A Study of Its Roots, Its Growth, and Its Decline* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1985); and Bradley W. Hart, *Hitler’s American Friends: The Third Reich’s Supporters in the United States* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2018).

10 The basic account of libertarianism, which glosses over the racism and nationalism of many of its exponents, is Brian Doherty, *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2007). Nancy MacLean, in a recent work, has suggested, implicitly, that a later generation of libertarians, headed by the economist James Buchanan, held racist views, but as she notes of Buchanan’s program, the economist “never mentioned race.” *Democracy in Chains: The Deep History of the Radical Right’s Stealth Plan for America* (New York: Viking, 2017), 84.

prudence, thrift, and personal industry. Their horror of communism, and of all “alien” ideas, was in part a product of the fact that these theories tended to question or upend the “natural” hierarchy ordained by the freely working market order. That this was not incompatible with racism is clear; and a fuller understanding of the evolution of libertarianism, which this article in part provides, must investigate why bigotry—from Merwin Hart to Ron Paul and the later Murray Rothbard—was so central to libertarian ideology.¹¹

Hart’s own power stemmed from two sources: the extraordinarily wide network of correspondence he maintained with figures across the right-wing spectrum, and his intimate connection to donors, such as the Du Pont brothers—especially Irénée and Pierre S.—which enabled him to fund the operations of the council and promote his activist causes. A prominent anti-interventionist, Hart harbored an intense antipathy to the suite of intergovernmental organizations that emerged from the ashes of the Second World War. “If [the] United Nations should succeed,” he wrote to Illinois Republican congressman Leo E. Allen in 1948, “it would simply place the control of our entire economy and our entire lives in the hands of internationalists.” But Hart’s opposition to the United Nations, to Bretton Woods, to the whole web of “globalist” organizations was an article of faith among conservatives during this period. In 1955, *National Review*, hardly a redoubt of nationalism, published its first edition with a “credenda” outlining the new publication’s position on a range of issues. The seventh paragraph summed up a decade of nationalist agitation on the right. “No superstition has more effectively bewitched America’s Liberal elite than the fashionable concepts of world government, the United Nations, internationalism. . . . It would make greater sense to grant independence to each of our 50 states than to surrender U.S. sovereignty to a world organization.”¹²

Till recently, scholars had made little of the intimate connections between figures like Hart and the emerging conservative mainstream of the 1940s and 1950s. In the standard account, the antistatist activists of the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s were a fragmentary minority, committed to a purist laissez-faire vision untainted by nativism or bigotry.¹³ But an appreciation of nationalism’s place at the birth of postwar conservatism complicates this picture. As this article will make clear, conservatives of many stripes proved willing to make common cause with the racist fringe of their movement. This fact allows us to move away from the dominant scholarly picture of conservatism as a movement guided, for the most part, by high-minded devotion to libertarian and

11 On this, in a later context, see Quinn Slobodian, “Anti-’68ers and the Racist-Libertarian Alliance: How a Schism among Austrian School Neoliberals Helped Spawn the Alt Right,” *Cultural Politics* 15, no. 3 (November 2019): 372–86.

12 MKH to Allen, June 9, 1948, in HSCLA, 336; “The Magazine’s Credenda,” *National Review*, November 19, 1955, 6.

13 George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945*, rev. ed. (1976; repr., Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2006), ch. 1.

traditionalist principles and enhancing the prerogatives of corporate capital, a movement with little connection to the far-right fringe.¹⁴ A more realistic view, which this article attempts to offer in outline, is that the boundaries between mainstream conservatism and nationalist, racist conservatism did not exist in the early phases—up until 1960—of the movement. The far-right fringe of conservatism was never fully “banished” from the movement even as late as the seventies, and it would return, as virulent as ever, in the form of paleoconservatism and paleolibertarianism after the Cold War. Decades, then, before the upheavals of the civil rights era, northern and midwestern nationalist conservatives had already developed a comprehensive racialized conception of political life.¹⁵ By better understanding the contours and significance of this vision, we can more clearly grasp the historical roots of many of the political convulsions of our own time.

Jasper Crane, a central financier of the conservative movement, voiced a familiar sentiment when he wrote to Leonard Read in 1946: “If we removed all barriers to the entrance into this country . . . this country would be inundated by alien people and the values of American life destroyed.”¹⁶ And when the libertarian intellectual Frank Chodorov set about forming an American Society of Individualists in the early 1950s, he included on his short list for members some familiar figures—William F. Buckley Jr., Samuel Pettengill, George Sokolsky, Garet Garrett, and Rose Wilder Lane—as well as a number of individuals from the nationalist right: Russell Maguire, a wealthy industrialist and member of Hart’s council’s executive committee, who would transform the *American Mercury* into a white supremacist digest; Charles Coburn, the prolific actor and anticommunist activist, who was later an honorary member of the white supremacist White Citizens Council; and Verne P. Kaub, an avowed nationalist conservative and associate of Hart and Buckley, who would later collaborate with Willis Carto’s far-right Liberty Lobby. As the following analysis of the careers of Hart and his allies will show, this was hardly an isolated case.¹⁷

14 On the consensus view, see, among many others, Nash, *Conservative Intellectual Movement*; Jonathan M. Schoenwald, *A Time for Choosing: The Rise of Modern American Conservatism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); Donald Critchlow, *The Conservative Ascendancy: How the GOP Right Made Political History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007); Gregory Schneider, *The Conservative Century: From Reaction to Revolution* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009); and Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Businessmen’s Crusade Against the New Deal* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2010). Newer works in this vein have discussed in passing the prevalence of racism among certain sections of the 1930s right. See, for instance, Kathryn S. Olmsted, *Right Out of California: The 1930s and the Big Business Roots of Modern Conservatism* (New York: New Press, 2015).

15 Cf. Joseph E. Lowndes, *From the New Deal to the New Right: Race and the Southern Origins of Modern Conservatism* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008).

16 Crane to Read, March 4, 1946, box 84, Jasper E. Crane Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE.

17 Chodorov to Alfred Kohlberg, memo, “American Society of Individualists,” September 18, 1952, box 33, Alfred Kohlberg Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA [here-

Two recent articles that discuss Hart have emphasized his prominent role in conservative circles during the 1930s and 1940s. Joseph Fronczak has noted Hart's role as a "field general" of anti-union forces in New York State and his relationship to the vigilante strike committees that combatted labor drives throughout the 1930s. Hart, Fronczak argues, was one of a number of transnational brokers of ideas who helped meld and mobilize a right-wing attack on "collectivism" that assumed global proportions.¹⁸ David Austin Walsh, in an article on Russell Maguire and the *American Mercury*, links Hart to Maguire and details, glancingly, Hart's role in an array of conservative organizations, his antisemitism, and his link with William F. Buckley Jr.¹⁹ Both articles underline Hart's importance, but neither offers a thoroughgoing analysis of the ideology and political praxis of Hart and his allies, the evolution of the organizations that Hart founded, or his links to an extraordinarily broad array of conservative activists of differing ideological hues. To understand Hart and his allies, we must situate Hart in his intellectual milieu, locating him within the cluster of right-wing intellectuals and operatives that he often presided over—that is what this article tries to do.

In addition to his work with mainstream conservatives, Hart operated as the linchpin of a group of zealous nationalist conservatives that coalesced in Chicago and New York. Among them were the businessmen Robert E. Wood and Sterling Morton, the nationalist conservative polemicist George Washington Robnett, the popular right-wing radio commentator Upton Close, and a slew of others. Inflamed by the rise of the New Deal and America's entry into the war, these men founded an array of groups intent on countering the nation's swing to the left. Central to the worldview of these men was a belief in the sanctity of the American republic, the numinous homeland of a white Christian majority menaced by foreign ideas and peoples.

The shifting relationship between Hart and his allies' brand of nationalist conservatism and the philosophy of the emerging conservative movement represented the central ideological drama on the American right during the 1940s and 1950s. At stake was the future of the conservative movement both ideologically and politically. Nevertheless, a tense peace between these groups—fostered by a common enemy—prevailed throughout the period. An embattled minority in terms of their grasp on the levers of state power, the conservatives and the nationalist conservatives found

after AKP]; *HSCLA*, 271; David Austin Walsh, "The Right-Wing Popular Front: The Far Right and American Conservatism in the 1950s," *Journal of American History* 107, no. 2 (September 2020): 412–32; "Citizens Council Cites Coburn," *Detroit Free Press*, June 14, 1959; George Michael, *Willis Carto and the American Far Right* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2008), 37. Chodorov was also friendly with Merwin Hart. Chodorov to F. A. Harper, January 3, 1950, Foundation for Economic Education Archives, in storage at 1890 Briarwood Road, Atlanta, GA, 30329, uncataloged.

18 Joseph Fronczak, "The Fascist Game: Transnational Political Transmission and the Genesis of the U.S. Modern Right," *Journal of American History* 105, no. 3 (December 2018): 581, 584, 587–88.

19 Walsh, "Right-Wing Popular Front," 415, 417–18.

common cause on the great majority of issues. They collaborated extensively, working to block progressive measures in Congress, form new organizations, and propagandize for conservatism. And in time, as the memory of World War II-era anti-interventionism faded and the Cold War erupted in the Far East, their ideas, shorn for the most part of bigotry, would all but combine.

The Career of a Bigot

Born into a wealthy family in 1881, Hart was educated at Harvard, where he graduated in the same class as Franklin Delano Roosevelt. A junior progressive Republican, Hart served in the New York State Legislature for two terms before retiring in 1911 to practice law privately and found a profitable insurance firm. In 1926, the legislature, largely as a result of Hart's efforts, established the Industrial Survey Commission to monitor government expenses. Drawing on the commission's findings, Hart brought together a group of conservative businessmen and proponents of private enterprise to found the New York State Economic Council in 1930.²⁰ At first, the council, which claimed fifty thousand members, primarily waged campaigns for economy in government and relief for businessmen from the "crushing" burden of taxation. But although Hart had opposed the expansion of government throughout the 1920s and early 1930s, his "road to Damascus" moment arrived with the coming of the New Deal. Entering middle age, and now fervently committed to the principles of conservatism, he was outraged by the relief measures pouring forth from the state legislature regarding strict government retrenchment as the only solution to the crisis of the Depression. "Business men are burdened by their affairs, wearied by efforts to fight off unwise laws," he wrote in the first *Economic Council Letter*, the forum—a brief newsletter—that would play host to his views for over three decades. "It should be made absolutely clear by government that the further invasion of private business activity has been brought to a definite and permanent halt."²¹

For the bulk of the 1930s and early 1940s, Hart used the *Letter* to attack the extension of government and preach the doctrines of property rights, limited government, and individual liberty. American capitalism, he argued, was a sacrosanct system, the wellspring of the nation's extraordinary material power. "Individual initiative," he wrote of America

20 "Merwin K. Hart Clubs Unite," *Utica (NY) Daily Press*, July 31, 1908, 6; "Tawney Out of Running at Primary," *The Rock Island (NY) Argus*, September 21, 1910, 1; Gail Quentin Unruh, "Ultraconservative Distortion: Merwin K. Hart and the National Economic Council," (master's thesis, University of Oregon, 1981), 6–8, 19–25; *Merwin K. Hart . . . American* (New York: National Economic Council, Inc., n.d.), 1–4, box 58, folder 6, GESP.

21 "The Unexpurgated History of the New York State Economic Council," n.d., box 1, folder 19, MKHP; "A Pioneer in the Fight for Economy: The New York State Economic Council," n.d. (c. 1933), box 49, Bruce Barton Papers, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI [hereafter BBP]; "Would Bar Ballot to All on Relief," *New York Times*, August 6, 1934, 17; MKH, *ECL*, no. 1 (February 1934): 1–3.

in 1942, “acting through private enterprise . . . has given to the greatest number of persons a higher standard of living than has been attained in any other nation. Never has the human spirit achieved so much for so many.”²² While Hart had begun to note the baleful effects of communism as early as 1935, the coming of the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939) seems to have wrought a distinct change in his thinking. That war, which he envisaged as a titanic struggle between Franco’s nationalist forces and the hydra of the Soviet East, bred in him an obsessive, vitriolic anticommunism, fueling his increasingly conspiratorial worldview. *America, Look at Spain*, a book published by Hart in 1939 based on a trip to that country, made plain his view of the civilizational stakes of the conflict. “Communism, defeated in Italy, in Germany and now in Spain, will probably make its last stand in the United States,” Hart argued. “At some time—probably during the Roosevelt administration—it is at least possible they will undertake a *coup* that if successful will reduce this country to a state of vassalage to Soviet Russia.” For Hart, like Dies, those who masqueraded as “liberals” were in fact witting or unwitting agents of Moscow, committed to planned totalitarianism and the “world-wide effort to overthrow Christian civilization.”²³

For his part, Hart’s fulminations earned him the censure of the voluble secretary of the interior Harold Ickes. In a 1940 speech, Ickes grouped him with Lawrence Dennis and Charles Lindbergh—two men Hart corresponded with—as fascist “appeasers.”²⁴ Hart’s appetite for controversy, though, was seemingly insatiable. Throughout the next two decades, from his position as head of the Economic Council, Hart held forth on the perfidies of the New Deal and the “alien” and “globalist” influences that he believed had penetrated the federal government. Conspiracy, on a grand scale, was the keynote of his thought. “The question of whether the United States will continue toward national Socialism will probably be settled in the next four years—possibly in the next 24 months,” he declared in 1945. A flood of propaganda “alien in origin and conception,” pushed by a highly organized and well-financed cabal, had corrupted national debate, he argued, opening the gates to “admit to our shores Communists and in particular, Communist Jews.” In a 1945 article, he listed seventy-nine individuals—of whom seventy-two were Jewish—who he alleged were actively attempting to undermine the “American way

22 MKH, *ECL*, no. 106 (November 1942): 1.

23 MKH, *ECL*, no. 34 (January 1936): 1; MKH, *America, Look at Spain* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1939), viii–ix, 194; MKH, *ECL*, no. 140 (March 1946): 3. Hart’s support for Franco led him to found the American Union for Nationalist Spain, a short-lived group aimed at countering the “Red propaganda of the Anti-Franco side.” “Minutes of Meeting of Executive Committee American Union for Nationalist Spain,” February 8, 1940, box 2, folder 27, MKHP. On Hart’s role as a mouthpiece for Franco, see Neal M. Rosendorf, *Franco Sells Spain to America: Hollywood, Tourism and Public Relations as Post-war Spanish Soft Power* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan), 13. See also Michael E. Chapman, “Pro-Franco Anti-Communism: Ellery Sedgwick and the ‘Atlantic Monthly,’” *Journal of Contemporary History* 41, no. 4 (October 2006): 657–58.

24 “Ickes Names Merwin K. Hart and Lindbergh as Appeasers,” *PM*, December 18, 1940, 11.

of life.” “The independent American Republic,” he warned, “will be destroyed if their domination continues.”²⁵

Hart’s conspiratorial antisemitism blended with a broader nativism. “A mysterious lobby,” he declared in one *Council Letter*, “put through last spring a D.P. [displaced persons] bill which will bring over four hundred thousand aliens into this country from Europe.” This infiltration of “audacious” refugees, he argued, was poisoning the nation’s character and subverting America’s traditional form of government. Hart, possessed by visions of a teeming horde of alien subversives, viewed communism through a prism of racialized resentment. “[O]ur loose immigration laws,” he argued in 1949, “and our yielding to the weak and slap-happy policy of admitting aliens, refugees and visitors without any real discrimination, have put trained Communist agents into ten thousand key positions in every activity in the United States.” For Hart, indeed, the influx of communist agents and the propaganda efforts of their allies constituted the grandest of all threats to the survival of America’s Christian republic. The agents of this vast conspiracy were a clique of “alien communists” intent on subjecting American civilization to the tyranny of a “world superstate controlled by the Zionist-Communists.”²⁶

Hart was obsessed with the erosion, in his eyes, of American national sovereignty. The desire for sovereignty, he believed, had been the motivation of the founders of the republic, who had erected a state of sovereign liberty without parallel in world history. Yet this sovereignty, he argued, jealously guarded for one hundred and fifty years, was being steadily eroded from all sides in the postwar world. The UN and the other “internationalist” institutions, he maintained, dangerously undermined the independence of the United States. “[N]ever has a great nation so completely sold out as the UN crowd has persuaded the government of the United States to sell out,” he declared in 1948. “Today we are faced with the same choice, sovereignty and freedom or loss of sovereignty and bondage.”²⁷

Unsurprisingly, Hart came to regard the New Deal, like the majority of his fellow conservatives, as simply the first wedge of Soviet-style communism. Since 1933, he argued in 1940, Marxist philosophy had been the dominant force in the shaping of America’s domestic policy. The true purpose of the “Communist infested ‘New Deal,’” he wrote, was to redistribute the wealth of the nation from the “productive and thrifty” to the undeserving poor. As often as not, Hart advanced a philosophy indistinguishable from that of mainstream conservatives. But by the late 1940s, he had retreated into a

25 MKH, *ECL*, no. 132 (April 1945): 1–3; MKH, *ECL*, no. 209 (February 1949): 1–3; Congressional Record, 81st Cong., 2nd Sess. (March 29, 1950), A2359.

26 MKH, *ECL*, no. 243 (July 1950): 1; MKH, *ECL*, no. 209 (February 1949): 4; MKH, *ECL*, no. 133 (May 1945): 1; MKH, *ECL*, no. 211 (March 1949): 2; MKH, *ECL*, no. 75 (March 1940): 4; MKH, *ECL*, no. 145 (June 1946): 3; MKH, *ECL*, no. 218 (July 1949): 4.

27 MKH, *ECL*, no. 139 (February 1946): 2, emphasis in original; MKH, *ECL*, no. 196 (August 1948): 4.

conspiratorial conservatism, one that regarded the “Zionist-Communist” plot as the master narrative of social and political life.²⁸

At first glance, it would be easy to dismiss Hart as a fringe figure, an extremist preaching to a modest and inconsequential faithful. Yet his council had powerful backers among the nation’s monied elite, his newsletter reached upwards of fifty thousand individuals—with over a million copies of some numbers distributed—and his remarks were frequently inserted into the *Congressional Register* by allies in Congress.²⁹ Hart, indeed, for all his bigotry and bluster, was in many respects a kind of policy entrepreneur, fashioning a range of positions that would later rise to prominence on the right. His implacable opposition to immigration was one example, as was his antipathy toward the United Nations, the proposed International Trade Organization, and other global organizations. But Hart commented freely on more specific matters. In the January 1948 issue of the *Council Letter*, Hart conjured the image of a communist takeover of the United States. “We have one concrete suggestion to make to every citizen,” he wrote. “Let him possess himself of one or more guns . . . [and be sure] that he and other members of his family know how to use them, and that he has a reasonable supply of ammunition.” As usual, a note of conspiracy entered his thinking. “It is not without significance, that in recent years leftwingers have constantly pressed for passage of laws requiring a license to own a gun, or, in some instances, forbidding private citizens to have guns.” For Hart, as for later activists, the right to bear arms was sacred; any attempt to abridge it was, de facto, a product of the Zionist-communist conspiracy.³⁰

The Building of a Nationalist “Front”

In April 1943, the New York State Economic Council became the National Economic Council (NEC) as Hart and his backers, freshly infused with money from the conservative Volker Fund and the Du Pont family, began an ambitious program of expansion. Offices in Chicago, and later Detroit, were added, as well as a research bureau in Washington, DC, headed by Harry S. Barger, a lawyer and seasoned political operative. Barger, who shared Hart’s antisemitism and his nationalist conservative convictions, functioned as a lobbyist for the NEC, helping to refine opposition to policies and draft prepared

28 MKH, *ECL*, no. 86 (December 1940): 1; MKH, *ECL*, no. 210 (March 1949): 2; MKH, *ECL*, no. 95 (October 1941): 3; MKH, *ECL*, no. 217 (June 1949): 2.

29 MKH to Irénée du Pont, April 7, 1949, Acc. 22, Ser. J, box 57, Irénée du Pont Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [hereafter IDPP]; “The Present Work of the NEC,” n.d. (c. 1944), Acc. 22, Ser. J, box 57, IDPP.

30 MKH, *ECL*, no. 183 (January 1948): 4, emphasis in original removed; MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 23, 1950, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP. Liberals were alarmed by Hart’s proposals. See “Arm Yourself with Guns, Advises Merwin K. Hart, Backer of Fascists,” *PM*, January 16, 1948, 8.

statements for congressional appearances by Hart and other council figures.³¹ In May of that year, the NEC launched its *Review of Books* under the editorship of the imperious but aging Albert Jay Nock. The recruitment of Nock, a sophisticated, acerbic, and influential libertarian essayist with broad connections to the conservative movement, was something of a coup for Hart. The activities of the NEC, Nock wrote to a friend in 1943, were “fully consistent with the convictions and principles that I have maintained in public and in private for forty years.” Nock used the platform to survey the state of conservative literature in the early 1940s, to mourn the loss of economic freedom, and to laud the small number of works that conformed to his hardnosed vision.³²

The war years were a time of frenetic activity for the NEC. “We are fighting two wars,” ran a council publication published in 1944: “a military war against the Axis powers for our survival as a nation, and a war on the home front against alien ideologies.” Although no supporter of Hitler, Hart, consumed by lurid visions of the communist conspiracy, regarded America’s entry into the war as symptomatic of the cancer that had infected the nation’s political life. “The situation of the American people at this moment is, I believe, critical in the extreme,” he wrote to the conservative publisher Frank Gannett in 1943. “There is strong evidence that they are being conditioned for Communism.” If individuals of “reputation” and “character” did not rise up and take control of the Republican Party, Hart reasoned, America would succumb to Soviet tyranny.³³

Hart’s allies during these years were not restricted to his nationalist conservative compatriots. He collaborated closely and corresponded with a range of mainstream libertarians including Rose Wilder Lane—who edited the council’s *Review of Books* after Nock’s death—the Jewish conservative columnist George Sokolsky, who was a close ally of Hart’s despite his antisemitism, Leonard Read, whom Hart visited regularly at the Foundation for Economic Education in Irvington, New York, and a host of others. The libertarian economist Orval Watts and journalist Edna Lonigan contributed to the council’s *Review of Books*, while Robert LeFevre, libertarian impresario and close ally of Lane’s, became vice president of the NEC in the mid-1950s. Hart also collaborated closely with the conservative Committee for Constitutional Government (CCG), conferring regularly with its secretary, Edward Rumely, on strategy, distributing the

31 MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 17, 1943, Irénée du Pont to MKH, June 30, 1943, and Lamnot du Pont to Irénée du Pont, March 29, 1944, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; MKH, memo, n.d. (c. 1943), Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; *HSCLA*, 42; MKH to Pat McCarran, February 15, 1951, box 3, folder 7, MKHP; MKH, “Memorandum of Conversation with Harry S. Barger,” December 1948, in *HSCLA*, 44.

32 Nock to Mrs. Edmund C. Evans and Ellen Winsor, September 21, 1944, in *Letters from Albert Jay Nock*, ed. Frank W. Garrison (Caldwell, ID: Caxton, 1949), 206. On Nock, the best biography is Michael Wreszin, *The Superfluous Anarchist: Albert Jay Nock* (Providence, RI: Brown University Press, 1971). See also, among others, Patrick Allitt, *The Conservatives: Ideas & Personalities Throughout American History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2009), 148–50.

33 NEC promotional flyer, n.d. (1944), box 58, folder 6, GESP; MKH to Gannett, October 5, 1943, box 2, folder 46, MKHP.

CCG's material, and campaigning for a constitutional amendment to limit taxation proposed by the conservative lawyer Robert Dresser, who was a director of both the CCG and the NEC.³⁴

At the same time, Hart cultivated his connections with the far right. Benjamin H. Freedman, notorious Holocaust denier and vehement antisemite, was a director of the NEC, and Hart established links throughout the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s with an array of figures on the far-right fringe of conservatism. Hart helped finance the publication of *Common Sense*, a newsletter published by the vitriolic antisemite Conde McGinley, and numbered among his allies Gerald L. K. Smith, America's most prominent antisemite. "I have many times thought with admiration of the courage that you both have shown," Hart wrote to Smith in 1960. "And I still have confidence that what you have done and what others have done will still bear fruit." Hart shared his far-right compatriots' taste for antisemitic literature. Of the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a notorious antisemitic forgery purporting to show a Jewish plot for world domination, he wrote: "I feel that what they [the *Protocols*] outline is exactly what is being worked out at the present time." Hart was also a close friend of John O. Beaty, whose *The Iron Curtain Over America* (1951)—condemned by the Anti-Defamation League as "one of the most anti-Semitic books ever published"—he strove to distribute across the nation.³⁵

Throughout these years the NEC was financed by an array of industrialists, including the chemicals tycoon Edgar Monsanto Queeny, the Du Pont brothers, the oil man and pivotal conservative financier J. Howard Pew, the salt magnate Sterling Morton, and

34 MKH to Wadsworth W. Mount, June 2, 1958, box 8, folder 22, MKHP; "Action of the Board of Directors of the NEC," June 1943, box 58, folder 6, GESP; Lane to MKH, January 4, 1961, box 5, folder 9, Rose Wilder Lane Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA; MKH to Charles W. Hawkins, November 10, 1947, in *HSCLA*, 259; C. G. Dall to Carl P. Dick, November 18, 1946, in *ibid.*, 203; Rumely to MKH, December 11, 1947, in *ibid.*, 273; *Platform For a Free America* (New York: National Economic Council, 1954), 7, box 130, AKP; LeFevre to MKH, May 10, 1954, and MKH to LeFevre, May 12, 1954, box 8, Robert LeFevre Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR; "Action of the Board of Directors of the National Economic Council," June 29, 1943, box 7, MKHP; MKH to James P. Selvage, January 20, 1947, in *HSCLA*, 205. On the CCG, see Joanne Dunnebecke, "The Crusade for Individual Liberty: The Committee for Constitutional Government, 1937–1958" (master's thesis, University of Wyoming, 1987).

35 *HSCLA*, 276; David B. MacDonald, *Identity Politics in the Age of Genocide: The Holocaust and Historical Representation* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 56; Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *The Troublemakers: An Anti-Defamation League Report* (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1952), 93–103; MKH to Pedro A. del Valle, December 21, 1949, in *HSCLA*, 530–31; MKH, "Memorandum of Trip to Chicago and Milwaukee, December 5–8, 1948," in *ibid.*, 375; MKH to Smith, December 29, 1960, box 52, Gerald L. K. Smith Papers, Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, MI; MKH to Douglas Reed, November 9, 1948, in *HSCLA*, 368; MKH to Freda Utey, February 27, 1952, box 9, Freda Utey Papers, Hoover Institution Archives, Stanford University, Palo Alto, CA. ADL quote is from Don E. Carleton, *Red Scare: Right-Wing Hysteria, Fifties Fanaticism, and Their Legacy in Texas* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2014), 118. On Smith, see Glen Jeansonne, *Gerald L. K. Smith: Minister of Hate* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997). The best source on Beaty is Frank P. Mintz, *The Liberty Lobby and the American Right: Race, Conspiracy, and Culture* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1985), 51–58; see, also, Walsh, "Right-Wing Popular Front," 416–17.

Robert E. Wood, the head of Sears Roebuck. Hart, in a 1948 letter to Pew, revealed that the NEC had received support from some three thousand donors, large and small, but it was clear that the council derived most of its funding from a small group of individuals and corporations.³⁶ Hart's financial backers, in the main, shared his taste for conspiracy. Irénée du Pont, a close confidant of Hart, regularly invoked a plot by left-wing elements to sabotage American government. As he wrote to Hart in 1949: "A few weeks ago, I received from you a good, fighting letter pointing out what the real, basic, underlying trouble is in Washington—an alliance of 'pinks' with some undesirable Jewish people who seem to have seized control of the Government."³⁷

Nationalism and the Conservative Movement

On a frigid winter's night in February 1956, a capacity crowd of 3,500 massed at Carnegie Hall in New York for a "patriotic rally" celebrating George Washington's birthday. Held under the auspices of For America, a new nationalist conservative organization, the night was dominated by a fiery and combative speech from Senator Joseph McCarthy, then at low ebb from the peak of his infamy, who, in little more than a year, would die aged forty-eight. As McCarthy stood up to speak the crowd roared its approval in a ninety-second ovation. "Our long-term objective," he thundered, "must be the eradication of communism from the face of the earth." In the middle of McCarthy's speech, someone called out the name of president Eisenhower, and the crowd roundly booed. Dan Smoot, dashing former FBI agent turned anticommunist ultra, stood up to speak. "Modern liberalism and Communism," he shouted, "are the same."³⁸

The purpose of the rally, wrote the secretary of For America, was "to give public emphasis to the need for protecting our country against further internationalist and socialistic encroachments." And on the stage that night, as an "honored guest," was Merwin Hart, an American flag draped across his lap, as well as two figures who, over the next few decades, would transform the political climate of the American right: William F. Buckley Jr., the enfant terrible of the right, a skilled debater and wily and

36 "Present Work of the NEC"; Lamnot du Pont to Fellow American, December 10, 1948, and Lamnot du Pont to Pew, December 22, 1948, box 18, J. Howard Pew Papers, Manuscripts and Archives Department, Hagley Museum and Library, Wilmington, DE [hereafter JHPP]; Pew to H. McAllister Griffiths, January 6, 1948, box 17, JHPP; MKH to Pew, June 23, 1948, box 18, JHPP; *HSCLA*, 69–70.

37 Lamnot du Pont to Irénée du Pont, March 29, 1944, and Irénée du Pont to MKH, January 7, 1948, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Irénée du Pont to John J. Williams, October 21, 1954, Acc. 228, Ser. J, box 105, IDPP; Irénée du Pont to MKH, July 12, 1949, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP.

38 "Thousands Hear Plea to Stand by America," *The Tablet* (Brooklyn, NY), March 3, 1956, 4; "M'Carthy Praises Role of M'Arthur," *New York Times*, February 23, 1956, 11; "Joe Likens MacArthur to George Washington in Speech at New York," *The Appleton (WI) Post-Crescent*, February 23, 1956, 2; Murray Kempton, "With Malice toward All," unattributed, n.d., clipping in box 133, Group Research Inc. Records, Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Columbia University, New York, NY.

precocious magazine editor; and Clarence Manion, a radio provocateur, conservative polemicist, and key ally of Barry Goldwater.³⁹

Buckley's connections to Hart and an earlier generation of conservative activists ran, by and large, through his father. Albert Jay Nock, George Robnett, and Hart himself were close friends with Buckley senior. On October 22, 1951, young Buckley launched his first, incendiary book, *God and Man at Yale*, at the University Club in New York, at an event hosted and organized by Hart. Hart's soirées were popular affairs, and a bevy of conservatives were in the audience.⁴⁰ In an earlier letter to the textile magnate Alfred Kohlberg, Hart had lavishly praised Buckley. "Few young Americans," he wrote, "promise to be so potent a factor in opposing both Communism and Socialism as young Bill Buckley."⁴¹ Robnett was especially enamored with Buckley, writing to an acquaintance that "Buckley has one of the most brilliant minds I have ever come in contact with."⁴² Hart functioned as an early mentor for young "Billie," the pair exchanging numerous letters on Buckley's work, while Buckley sent the manuscript of *God and Man* to Hart for his approval.⁴³ Buckley was also an attentive reader of Hart's NEC literature. In *God and Man* he repeatedly cited Rose Wilder Lane's 1947 review of Lorie Tarshis's *The Elements of Economics* in the *Review of Books*.⁴⁴ In a 1953 letter to Hart, Buckley professed himself "in agreement with the overwhelming majority of your positions," and, writing to Joseph McCarthy's secretary, Buckley asserted that "90% of what has been said about him [Hart] is unjust."⁴⁵ But by the late 1950s Buckley had drifted

39 Raymond S. Richmond, memo, "To All Holders of Tickets to the Carnegie Hall Patriotic Rally," February 18, 1956, b. 18, f. 13, MKHP; "Radioman Plugs 'For America,' 'Lunatic Fringe' of Right Wing," *The Gazette and Daily* (York, PA), June 20, 1956, 2; MKH to Richmond, February 15, 1956, and February 23, 1956, MKH to Bonner Fellers, February 29, 1956, and June 1, 1955, box 8, folder 13, MKHP. On Buckley, the best account is still John B. Judis, *William F. Buckley, Jr.: Patron Saint of the Conservatives* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988). On Manion, see Nicole Hemmer, *Messengers of the Right: Conservative Media and the Transformation of American Politics* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).

40 Henry Regnery to MKH, October 4, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP.

41 MKH to Kohlberg, October 4, 1951, box 130, AKP.

42 Robnett to James W. Clise, December 5, 1955, box 6, James W. Clise Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR.

43 MKH to Buckley, October 11, 1951, box 2, folder 34, MKHP; Sandra J. Peart and David M. Levy, "F. A. Hayek and the 'Individualists,'" in *F. A. Hayek and the Modern Economy*, ed. Sandra J. Peart and David M. Levy (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 30–33.

44 William F. Buckley Jr., *God and Man at Yale: The Superstitions of "Academic Freedom"* (1951; repr., Washington, DC: Regnery, 2002), 64, 221.

45 Buckley to MKH, April 7, 1953, Acc. 1997–M–160, box 4, William F. Buckley Jr. Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT [hereafter WFBP]; Buckley to Mary Driscoll, December 29, 1954, box 3, WFBP.

away from Hart, probably as a result of the older man's increasingly rabid antisemitism. Buckley seems, though, to have retained some confidence in Hart's abilities. In 1960, Hart became a member of the national advisory committee of Young Americans for Freedom, an influential conservative youth group that Buckley played a central role in founding. It was another link in the chain between the "old" and the "new" right.⁴⁶

Upton Close and the Evolution of Nationalism

In February 1946, the NEC began sponsoring the radio broadcasts of the widely known commentator and nationalist conservative Upton Close. Short and thin, with an unruly shock of black hair and large, drooping ears, Close fit the picture of a "rabble rouser," as his opponents dubbed him, to a tee. Born in Washington State, in 1895, as Joseph Washington Hall—he later acquired the *nom de guerre* Upton Close—he was raised on the western frontier on an Indian reservation along the Columbia River. In 1916, Close traveled to Shantung province in China, where he was placed in charge of the espionage arm of the American Legation, tasked with providing intelligence on the Japanese invasion of China. Throughout this period, and extending into the 1930s, Close served as a roving correspondent in Asia, publishing a series of well-regarded books on Chinese and Japanese social and political life and lecturing at the University of Washington. His politics in these years hewed to an internationalist liberalism. He was, above all, an adventurer, a swashbuckling correspondent who crammed his books full of vivid, picaresque episodes gleaned from his travels. Close's journalistic élan and sympathetic portraits of Asian life earned him a measure of fame, and his work was published in an array of high-profile American publications, including the *Saturday Evening Post* and the *New York Times*, which christened him "a prophet of the new order in Asia."⁴⁷

46 Herbert V. Kohler to MKH, October 13, 1960, box 8, folder 20, MKHP. On the YAF, see Gregory L. Schneider, *Cadres for Conservatism: Young Americans for Freedom and the Rise of the Contemporary Right* (New York: New York University Press, 1999). Buckley's early view of the nationalist right was summed up in a letter he wrote to an acquaintance about the former fascist propagandist Allan Zoll in late 1951: "I believe Allan Zoll's outfit is doing a splendid job. As for Zoll's past, I am utterly uninterested in it at the present time. . . . That is to say nothing of the fact that none of the leftist smear organizations has yet convinced me that they have stopped lying when they deal with Allan Zoll." Buckley to C. H. Huvelle, December 13, 1951, box 27, folder 2, Lucille Cardin Crain Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR.

47 "American Action Support Confronts Joseph McCarthy," *The Sheboygan (WI) Press*, October 10, 1946, 6; Irving E. Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1977), 121–25; "Thrills Crowd Author's Life," *The Saskatoon (SK) Phoenix*, September 3, 1927, 21; Erna S. Tilley, "Upton Close—Joseph Washington Hall," n.d., box 1, Erna Spannagel Tilley Papers, Special Collections, University of Washington Libraries, Seattle, WA; "Brotherhoods Join in Meeting," *The Mansfield (OH) News*, January 25, 1928, 16; Dixon Wecter, "Hearing is Believing," *Atlantic Monthly*, August 1945, 55–56.

By the early 1940s, Close had swung to the right, embracing a vehement nationalist conservatism. The proximate cause of his shift seems to have been the coming of war in Europe. Although not sympathetic to Hitler, Close bitterly opposed American entry into the conflict, believing it would empower the Soviet Union and compromise America's capitalist order. Close believed, above all, in a "new and fervent American nationalism," and like Hart, he spurned the internationalist organizations that emerged from the Second World War. The United Nations, he argued, was the product of a "socialist plot," part and parcel of the Soviet design for world domination. Capitalism, he maintained, was the truly liberalizing force in human affairs. Unsurprisingly, Close regarded the New Deal as simply an "aborted" form of Marxism. The Roosevelt administration had orchestrated an all-out assault on private property. Its efforts were a prelude, he believed, to socialism in America.⁴⁸

In 1944, Close began work as a columnist for the *San Francisco Examiner*, the jewel in the crown of William Randolph Hearst's media empire. He used his column to attack the foreign policy of the Roosevelt administration and warn darkly of the red menace. The communist conspiracy, he argued in 1946, had penetrated the Truman administration, the labor unions, academia, and the churches. What was needed, he believed, was "a people's uprising" and the establishment of committees in every town and city tasked with monitoring communist propaganda and the encroaching Soviet threat. Close's vision of the communist conspiracy encompassed the totality of American political and social life. He indulged in wild imaginings, lapsing, at times, into self-parody. "How many of your friends realize that there is a close alliance between the campaign of cheap, unmoral pictures which come week after week to the theaters, and the Marxist program of revolution?" he asked in 1947. "The tie-up is found in the Communist attack on religion."⁴⁹

From 1934 to 1941, Close appeared sporadically as a radio commentator for NBC, discoursing on Asian affairs and American politics. From 1941 to 1944, he was given his own show, developing a loyal following as an expert on the Far East, a vociferous critic of liberalism, and an ardent anti-interventionist. The extension of American aid to Russia, he declared in May 1944, was being used to "support the creation of a greater

48 Upton Close, address before the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce, Tacoma, WA, October 9, 1943 (probable year), Post Presidential Individual Correspondence [hereafter PPIC], box 37, Herbert Hoover Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA [hereafter HHP]; Upton Close, "Common Sense for Americans," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, August 11, 1940, 3B; Close quoted in Forster and Epstein, *Troublemakers*, 21; Wecter, "Hearing is Believing," 59; L. M. Birkhead to WOR, August 22, 1946, box 1, Friends of Democracy Records, David M. Rubenstein Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Duke University, Durham, NC [hereafter FODR]; Upton Close, address before the North Dakota Education Association, Fargo, ND, October 24, 1946, box 1, FODR; "Close Lambasts New Deal; Labels His Opponents As 'Reds,'" *The Capital Times* (Madison, WI), October 29, 1946, 6.

49 Upton Close, "Upton Close Says," *San Francisco Examiner*, March 2, 1946, 7; Upton Close, "Upton Close Reports," *San Francisco Examiner*, January 27, 1947, 17.

totalitarian empire from which individual enterprise is barred.” The triumph of the USSR, he argued, would result in a dictatorship that encompassed all of Asia. His fans were ecstatic. A prominent conservative industrialist, writing to Close, invoked the “thrill that there is one American left who dares to say what he says—and how he says it!!!” But in October 1944, Close was dropped from the NBC lineup after he vigorously defended Tyler Kent, an American diplomat convicted of passing on information to the Axis powers about Roosevelt’s earlier efforts to draw America into the war. Close, ever ready to assume the pose of a martyr, complained that radical elements had forced him off the air. In Congress, Republican representative Roy Woodruff of Michigan denounced Close’s firing as “terrorism on the radio,” the direct result of a policy of disbaring writers and commentators who would “not bend the knee to the administration.”⁵⁰

By late 1945, a campaign was building to put Close back on the air. As Senator Albert Hawkes of New Jersey wrote to Irénée du Pont in October: “I consider the question of putting Mr. Upton Close back on the air is [*sic*] so important to all who wish to combat the evil influences of un-American commentators and publications.” The NEC, guided by Hart’s devotion to Close’s broadcasts, swung into action, swiftly raising some \$230,000 to provide a regular spot for Close’s fulminations. “[W]e are glad to sponsor Upton Close,” Hart crowed in his *Council Letter*, “because of his broad knowledge, his sterling patriotism, his righteous indignation over current attempts to wreck this great Republic by shooting into its bloodstream the virus of Communism.” Close’s broadcasts, Hart argued, would help bring about a new birth of freedom, a return to the “kind of United States we had for 150 years.”⁵¹

In February 1946, Close began broadcasting under the sponsorship of the NEC. “This is an American program, and will remain an American program,” he declared in the first broadcast. “It is for America first, it is for America last, and it is for America all the time.” He used his program to attack his enemies on the left and laud the blessings of free enterprise.⁵² For Close, American capitalism had raised the nation from an agrarian backwater to a position of unparalleled supremacy in world affairs. The Founding Fathers, he argued, had rejected European collectivism, fashioning a new

50 Fang, *Those Radio Commentators!*, 124–25; Wecter, “Hearing is Believing,” 59; Upton Close, “Close-Ups of the News,” radio transcript, May 7, 1944, 2, box 1, folder 35, American Reactionary Political Ephemera Collection, Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL; Vivien Kellems to Julia and Upton Close, September 26, 1944, box 10, folder 4, Vivien Kellems Papers, Archives and Special Collections, University of Connecticut, Storrs, CT; “Upton Close Lays Air Ban to ‘Red’ Pressure,” *San Francisco Examiner*, November 15, 1944, 9; Upton Close, “Upton Close Reports,” *San Francisco Examiner*, October 23, 1944, 15; *Congressional Record*, 78th Cong., 2nd Sess. (December 6, 1944), 8,936.

51 Hawkes to Irénée du Pont, October 22, 1945, Acc. 228, Ser. J, box 104, IDPP; Arnold Forster, *A Measure of Freedom: An Anti-Defamation League Report* (New York: Doubleday, 1950), 50; MKH, *ECL*, no. 140 (March 1946): 1.

52 Upton Close, script of broadcast over the Mutual Network, February 19, 1946, 1. All copies of scripts in possession of author.

type of state premised on the liberty of the individual. The essence of this, the American experiment, was a faith in the rights of property as the keystone of individual freedom. “Private ownership is the *basic* freedom of *all* the liberty for which our fathers fought,” he declared. “Where private ownership is untrammled men get freedom in all other phases of life. Where private ownership is *destroyed* all other liberty is supplanted by the voice of the boss and slavery to government.” Yet the system of free enterprise and individual liberty, he believed, stood menaced from all sides. No compromise could be made with the enemies of America, no quarter given to socialism, for the nation could not operate “half free and half communized.” America would enter a new era of abundance and freedom if, and only if, the restrictions on free enterprise were scrapped, and the energies and ingenuity of the people liberated at last from the “paternalism” of the “pro-Russian” New Deal.⁵³

In his broadcasts, Close called for a new “nationalism,” a vigorous faith that would rest on the example of America—conceived in liberty—rather than an “internationalism” based on “the thin and *tainted* air of a pretended community of interest between *our* elective government and Russian dictatorship.” His plea apparently fell on receptive ears. By April, Close was broadcasting on more than sixty stations and receiving four and a half thousand letters a month from listeners. His broadcasts were managed by Leo F. Reardon, a former lieutenant of Father Charles Coughlin, the radio priest—and by this point virulent antisemite—who had preached to a colossal audience throughout the 1930s. Reardon, a hard-line nationalist with close ties to Hart who would later manage the broadcasts of Clarence Manion, decried the efforts of the “internationalists” to “sink the United States into One-World oblivion.” Under his influence Close’s efforts grew, throughout 1946, more and more extreme, attracting a hailstorm of criticism from the left. Yet their success was, in many respects, undeniable. By August, the NEC had secured for the broadcasts a large New York station, bringing Close’s audience to around eight million per episode. The broadcasts, Hart wrote that same month, had “stirred up fresh animosities among the reds and pinks, and this is the best possible test of our growing success.”⁵⁴

53 Close, script of broadcast, February 19, 1946, 1–2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, June 11, 1946, 2, emphasis in original; Upton Close, script of broadcast, March 19, 1946, 2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, April 16, 1946, 2; Upton Close, script of broadcast, March 26, 1946, 1; Upton Close, script of broadcast, February 4, 1947, 1; Upton Close, script of broadcast, August 6, 1946, 2.

54 Close, script of broadcast, February 4, 1947, 2, emphasis in original; Close to Friend, April 1, 1946, box 14, Charles Parsons Papers, Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, New Haven, CT; Arnold Forster and Benjamin R. Epstein, *Danger On the Right* (New York: Random House, 1964), 115–16; Reardon, open letter, n.d., box 51, Sterling Morton Papers, Chicago History Museum, Chicago, IL [hereafter SMP]; “Freedom of Speech In New York (?),” *The Tablet*, August 31, 1946, 3; MKH to Sterling Morton, August 22, 1946, box 8, SMP. On Coughlin, see, among others, Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest: Huey Long, Father Coughlin, & the Great Depression* (New York: Knopf, 1982), esp. ch. 4; and Ronald H. Carpenter, *Father Charles E. Coughlin: Surrogate Spokesman for the Disaffected* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1998). According to journalist John L. Spivak, Reardon had served as Coughlin’s

Organizing Resistance: American Action, Inc.

Close was convinced that the American republic stood at a precipice, that the fate of human liberty and private enterprise in the United States “could be settled forever” by the 1946 elections. He was not alone. In February 1945, Hart and a group of fellow conservatives began planning a new national political committee that would combat the Congress of Industrial Organization’s Political Action Committee (CIO-PAC) on its own terms.⁵⁵ Christened American Action, the organization’s purpose was to defend America against its domestic “enemies” by intervening in congressional elections in support of conservative candidates. Hart had been planning an organization that would extend into congressional districts since late 1944, but American Action was larger and more sophisticated than anything he had attempted before. Over two balmy days, in Chicago in July 1945, some forty delegates from across the nation met to adopt a statement of principles and begin preparation for the following year’s congressional elections. In attendance were a host of conservatives, including John T. Flynn, Samuel Pettengill, George Robnett, and Upton Close.⁵⁶

American Action embodied, in many ways, the midwestern anti-interventionist nationalism championed by Robert R. McCormick of the *Chicago Tribune*—not least because McCormick was a high-profile supporter. But it pointedly eschewed foreign policy for a domestic program that hewed, in its essentials, to the philosophy of the nationalist conservatives. Its aim was to “organize the great *majorities* of the Right more

emissary to Germany, with Reardon visiting Berlin in 1939 to convene with Hitler, among other Nazi leaders. Spivak, *The “Save the Country” Racket* (New York: New Century Publishers, 1948), 13. Spivak was much later revealed to be a KGB agent. See John Earl Haynes, Harvey Klehr, and Alexander Vassiliev, *Spies: The Rise and Fall of the KGB in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 160–64.

55 The seed of the organization, seemingly, was a meeting Hart held with Robert R. McCormick in early 1944. MKH to McCormick, March 13, 1944, Business Correspondence, box 38, Robert R. McCormick Papers, Charles Deering McCormick Library, Northwestern University, Evanston, IL. Spivak, in his exposé of American Action, attributes the idea for the organization entirely to Hart. Spivak, *Save the Country*, 6, 10. Spivak also writes, “Hart discussed the idea with John T. Flynn in the East, former Congressman Samuel Pettengill in the Mid-West and Upton Close, the radio commentator, on the west coast” (8).

56 “Help to Keep Upton Close On the Air,” n.d. (1946), box 1, FODR; Close to Friend and Subscriber, January 7, 1946, box 1, FODR; MKH to Irénée du Pont, June 28, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Samuel Grafton, “They’ve Got Everything,” *The Tennessean* (Nashville, TN), October 11, 1946, 25; MKH to John T. Flynn, December 16, 1944, box 2, folder 42, MKHP; MKH to Robert Lund, December 1, 1945, box 58, folder 6, GESP; MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 15, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; Cary McWilliams, *A Mask for Privilege: Anti-Semitism in America* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1949), 196–97; John Roy Carlson, *The Plotters* (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1946), 288–89; Walter K. Lewis, “Behind the New Action Committee,” *New Leader*, October 12, 1946, clipping in box 1, Jewish Community Relations Council of Minnesota Records, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul, MN [hereafter JCRCR]. According to John Spivak, Hart and Close had by this time severed their friendship over disagreements with the financing of Close’s radio programs. Spivak, *Save the Country*, 22–28.

effectively than alien-minded radicals have organized the vociferous *minorities* of the Left,” to “purge” the major parties of opportunistic leadership and advance the principles of free enterprise, property rights, and individual liberty.⁵⁷ The ideology propagated by American Action fused a militant libertarianism with vitriolic anticommunism and the nativist fear of the alien other. The organization championed ruthlessly cutting federal spending, a total ban on immigration, a constitutional amendment limiting taxation, and the repeal of all laws that restricted free enterprise.⁵⁸

In December 1945, writing to Robert L. Lund, a former president of the National Association of Manufacturers, Hart noted that the preliminary organization of American Action was progressing apace. The organization’s plan was to assemble political committees in various states, distribute literature to voters, hold meetings, and systematically canvass voters district by district. American Action swiftly opened offices in Chicago and Los Angeles, and by mid-1946 the organization was actively intervening on the ground in an array of states.⁵⁹

Robert E. Wood, the head of Sears Roebuck and leader of the prewar anti-interventionist America First Committee (AFC), played a critical role in the development of American Action. A former general in the US army, he had risen to fame as the dynamic and wildly successful head of Sears. Throughout the 1930s, he supported much of the New Deal, corresponding regularly with Roosevelt and other administration figures, but the coming of war brought about a revolution in his thought. As head of the AFC, Wood channeled his energies into a campaign to stop American entry into the conflict, a cause that progressively isolated him from his erstwhile allies. In the years following Pearl Harbor and the dissolution of the AFC, he embraced a hard-line nationalist conservatism, expending a considerable portion of his fortune in support of an array of conservative groups. His worldview combined a fevered anti-interventionism and antiglobalism with a resolute belief in free-market capitalism, and he was instrumental in devising the strategy of American Action, guaranteeing that it would not be another “propaganda” outfit but one committed to direct political action in marginal congressional districts. Drawing on his extensive contacts in the US Congress,

57 Marquis Childs, “Calling Washington,” *Washington Post*, October 19, 1946, 6; *Hearings Before the Committee to Investigate Campaign Expenditures, House of Representatives* [hereafter *CICE*], 79th Cong., 2nd Sess. (October 1946), 205; “American Action: This Light Must Never Go Out!,” n.d. (c. 1946), 3–4, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP, emphasis in original.

58 “American Action,” 5; “General Plan,” n.d. (c. 1945), 9–10, box 26, Robert E. Wood Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA [hereafter REWP]. On McCormick, see Richard Norton Smith’s superb *The Colonel: The Life and Legend of Robert R. McCormick, 1880–1955* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1997).

59 “General Plan,” 3; *CICE*, 218.

Wood managed to secure the blessing of the “topmost” Republican and “constitutional” Democratic leaders for the cause.⁶⁰

American Action was, in many ways, not a new venture in American politics but the product of a long period of exploratory work in the construction of a durable right-wing alliance. With its roots in the AFC, of which Hart had been a prominent member, the group drew on the energies and enmities of a representative selection of the nationalist conservative right. Salem Bader, a notorious Los Angeles nationalist, and Gertrude Coogan, a nationalist conservative polemicist, were both integral to the founding of the group, as were figures such as the libertarian Duke law professor and Committee for Constitutional Government advisory board member Malcolm McDermott. It was funded by a similar group of donors—the Du Ponts, the Pews, Robert Dresser, Frank Gannett, the heads of GM and the Volker Fund, among others—that supported the NEC, the Foundation for Economic Education, and other conservative organizations. Its leadership included several CCG trustees and top NEC figures, as well as representatives of conservative business groups, such as the National Small Business Men’s Association.⁶¹ And it included on its executive committee Robert M. Harriss, Charles Coughlin’s intimate friend and supporter, cementing American Action’s connections with the prewar far right.⁶²

In August 1946, Hart stepped down as national executive of American Action. Wood, in an earlier letter to John T. Flynn, had criticized Hart’s approach, and it seems likely that he pressured Hart to relinquish control. In retrospect, Hart’s demotion seemed to indicate that his influence on the conservative movement was beginning, slowly, to wane. Hart’s replacement, Edward A. Hayes, a former national commander of the American Legion, was a less controversial figurehead, although Hart remained

60 Justus D. Doenecke, “General Robert E. Wood: The Evolution of a Conservative,” *Journal of the Illinois State Historical Society* 71, no. 3 (August 1978): 163–74; “Statement by General Robert E. Wood,” August 5, 1957, box 162, J. Bracken Lee Papers, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah, Salt Lake City, UT; Wood to Irénée du Pont, August 15, 1946, and MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 5, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP. On the AFC, see the classic account by Wayne S. Cole, *America First: The Battle Against Intervention, 1940–1941* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1953).

61 Harry Wohl, “Isolationists Rally in Chicago to Kill ‘One World’ Plans,” *The St. Louis Star and Times*, July 26, 1943, 1; McWilliams, *Mask for Privilege*, 200; Walter K. Lewis, “American Action Meets in Secret,” *New Leader*, November 2, 1946, clipping in box 1, JCRCR; Eugene Segal, “Upton Close Group Called Anti-Semitic,” *The Pittsburgh Press*, March 7, 1946, 14; Carlson, *Plotters*, 145–46; *CICE*, 213, 242–45; “Report on Rumely Groups: Installment IV,” *Democracy’s Battle*, May 1950, 1–2; Eugene Segal, “New Nationalist Group Starts with Some Acceptable Things, Then Attack on Jews Is Launched in Meeting,” *The Knoxville (TN) News-Sentinel*, March 5, 1946, 15; “Financiers Support Hateler Coalition,” *The Propaganda Battlefield*, September 30, 1946, clipping in box 1, JCRCR.

62 Spivak, *Save the Country*, 31; “From One Hole to Another—Our Goofy Gold Game,” *On the March*, May 1939, 9–10; “Pro-Fascist Groups Unchanged by Roosevelt Proclamation,” *City Reporter*, June 3, 1941, 4. According to Spivak, Hart was pushed out because he was widely known as “pro-fascist” and the organization decided it needed a leader with a clean reputation. Spivak, *Save the Country*, 21.

a key member of the organization's executive committee. Hayes was, in many ways, an inspired choice. Drawing on his nationwide connections to "patriotic" organizations such as the American Legion, American Action was able to quickly mobilize individuals on the ground.⁶³

By October 1946, American Action was active in ten states. Although the organization was outwardly bipartisan, in practice it exclusively backed Republicans. It supported candidates in five districts in Illinois and Massachusetts, in two districts in California, and candidates in Connecticut, New Hampshire, New York, Oklahoma, Michigan, New Jersey, and Wisconsin, while aiding candidates for the Senate in a number of races. Hayes traveled the country, attending rallies in support of American Action's favored candidates, such as Fred E. Busbey, a nationalist conservative congressman who liaised regularly with the organization.⁶⁴ Ultimately, American Action spent \$114,000 on the election, about one-sixth of both the Republican National Committee budget of \$650,000 and the \$665,000 disbursed by the CIO-PAC. It was a year of Republican triumph, and the money raised by American Action was seemingly well spent. Twenty-two of the twenty-three candidates American Action backed were elected. The organization, in a twist of fate, liberally backed the senatorial candidacy of a little-known former marine from Wisconsin, Joseph R. McCarthy. Hayes was delighted with the result. American Action's efforts, he declared, "not alone measured up to expectations but surpassed them." Wood was similarly pleased, praising Hayes for his "magnificent job," while the politicians who had received support flooded Hayes with appreciative letters.⁶⁵

Wood hoped to keep American Action active for the 1948 election, convinced that the year would bring further heavy Republican gains. "[T]he Chairman of the Republican National Committee," Wood wrote to a business associate in June 1948, "is

63 Wood to Flynn, March 1, 1946, box 5, REWP; MKH to Irénée du Pont, October 15, 1945, Acc. 22, box 57, IDPP; *CICE*, 203, 210, 256.

64 "American Action, Inc. Claims Political Activity," *Portage (WI) Daily Register*, October 17, 1946, 2; "General Plan," 7–8; *Report of the Special Committee on Campaign Expenditures, House of Representatives* [hereafter *RSCCE*], 79th Cong., 2nd Sess. (1947), 33; Harold T. Halfpenny to Percy Priest, October 30, 1946, in *CICE*, 236–37; "American Action' Group in 10 States," *The Green Bay (WI) Press-Gazette*, October 17, 1946, 2; "Trouble for the Republicans?," *The Rhinelander (WI) Daily News*, October 28, 1946, 4; Wood to Sterling Morton, October 15, 1947, box 10, SMP.

65 *RSCCE*, 33; Mary Spargo, "Political Expenditures Smash Record for Off-Year Election," *Washington Post*, November 5, 1946, 9; Hayes to Sterling Morton, July 14, 1948, box 11, SMP; Karl E. Meyer, "The Politics of Loyalty: From La Follette to McCarthy in Wisconsin, 1918–1952" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1956), 148; Edward A. Hayes, "American Action Leader Answers Leftist Smears," *The Tablet*, November 30, 1946, 6; Wood to R. K. Christenberry, November 15, 1946, box 26, REWP. On the letters from congressmen, see the material in box 26, REWP. McCarthy returned the favor, appearing on Close's radio program in 1950, and inserting Close's newsletters into the Congressional Record. Reportedly, the pair saw each other almost twice a day during this period, and Close seems to have ghostwritten some of McCarthy's speeches. See Charles R. Allen Jr. and Arthur J. Dugloff, "McCarthy and Anti-Semitism: A Documentary Exposé," *Jewish Life*, July 1953, 5–6.

very anxious to have American Action do what it can in this election.”The organization successfully backed a number of by-election candidates in 1947, drawing on finances supplied by Wood’s extensive business contacts. And evidence suggests that American Action campaigned, in a modest way, in the 1948 elections. But following Truman’s victory—a “crushing defeat,” in Hart’s words, due to “liberal” infiltration of the Republican Party—the organization was dissolved. Ultimately, the grand plan of the founders of American Action—the effort, always agonizing, to forge a durable and broad-based conservative alliance—would have to wait till the 1960s.⁶⁶

George W. Robnett and the Allure of Antisemitism

A close ally of Hart and Upton Close, the former advertising man George Washington Robnett carved out a peripatetic career as a nationalist conservative polemicist throughout 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s. Tall, thin, and balding, with small, quizzical eyes, jowly features, and a penchant for loud ties, Robnett was an ardent foe of liberalism with broad links to the conservative mainstream. Born in 1889, in rural Illinois, he was raised on a farm in the “backwoods” in a family shadowed by poverty. By his early twenties, he had abandoned rural life, moving to Chicago in pursuit of a career in advertising and corporate publicity. His earliest publishing forays were in success literature—giddy, bite-size essays on the principles of Getting Ahead. He was an early and passionate supporter of Herbert Hoover, with whom he corresponded at length. And with the coming of the New Deal and the Roosevelt “revolution,” he embraced an unyielding conservatism, aghast at the reckless “squandering” of federal funds that he regarded as the essence of the New Deal.⁶⁷

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, Robnett studied the reports of congressional committees formed to counter subversive movements and began accumulating a large library of left-wing literature. His task, as he would later recall, was to “bring out into the open the nature and character and purpose of some of the main communist ‘fronts’ in this country.” Robnett believed, like many conservatives, that the origin of the communist conspiracy in America could be traced to Roosevelt’s diplomatic recognition of the USSR in 1933. “Stalin’s regime was tottering,” he declared in 1948, “and there

66 Wood to Lamar Fleming Jr., June 17, 1948, Wood, open letter, n.d. (c. December 1947), and Wood to H. R. Cullen, October 11, 1948, box 26, REWP; MKH, *ECL*, no. 203 (November 1948): 1.

67 “Altrusa Club’s President to Wed George W. Robnett,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 17, 1921, 15; “Notice for Publication: Department of the Interior, U.S. Land Office at Lawton, Okla., June 16, 1909,” *The Cheyenne (OK) Star*, July 1, 1909, 7; George W. Robnett, “The Power of Truth,” *The Salt Lake (UT) Telegram*, November 14, 1918, 2; M. L. Crawford, “Chicago Better Business Bureau, Inc. re: Church League of America,” July 8, 1943, box 8, JHPP; Shirley Lees, “Speaker Says Immigration Law Keeps Undesirable Aliens Out,” *The Pomona (CA) Progress Bulletin*, March 4, 1957, 9; Robnett to Hoover, July 22, 1935, PPIC, box 194, HHP; George W. Robnett, “Vote Counting Problems,” *Los Angeles Times*, December 12, 1960, 3.

were people in America who wanted to keep communism alive.” Indeed, the New Deal, he believed, was ultimately a phase in the “socialistic” revolution that had encircled the globe.⁶⁸

Robnett’s thought combined a purist libertarianism with the nativism and bigotry of the nationalist right. Free enterprise, he told an audience in 1948, “is the only true freedom,” for capitalism provided the material basis for the maintenance of American liberties. The essential human freedoms that the Founding Fathers fought for, Robnett argued in 1945, were being attacked and repudiated “*everywhere in the world.*” Capitalism, he warned, was under siege from an army of “leftists” who were “hacking away” at its foundations. The assault on free enterprise, for Robnett, was the logical product of the communist conspiracy. Robnett, like his allies, regarded the conspiracy as the animating force of all political conflict in the United States. In thrall to visions of “alien” subversives, he indulged in many of the same conspiratorial narratives that governed Hart’s thought.⁶⁹

In 1937, on a frigid March afternoon at the Union League Club in Chicago, Robnett founded the Church League of America (CLA) with Frank J. Loesch, a prominent lawyer and former head of the Chicago Crime Commission, and Henry P. Crowell, chairman of the board of Quaker Oats. The purpose of the Church League was to expose and fight “Marxian-radicalism” in American life and to champion the principles of conservatism. Robnett, the guiding force of the organization, assumed the role of executive secretary of the league’s National Laymen’s Council. Despite its name, the Church League was not really a religious organization, although it counted some six thousand clergymen as members. In its early years, it relied on affiliated pastors to propagandize for conservatism, but the voice of the organization, the newsletter *News and Views*, was edited and written by Robnett with a distinctly secular cast. Robnett, as he later admitted, was “not much of a religionist,” and he avoided, for the most part, religious themes, using *News and Views* as a vehicle for his own brand of nationalist conservatism.⁷⁰

68 Forster and Epstein, *Danger on the Right*, 144–45; Robnett to Harry Bennett, August 16, 1945, box 1, George Washington Robnett Papers, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene, OR [hereafter GWRPO]; “Fight for Old American Way, GOP Club Told,” *Minneapolis Sunday Tribune*, March 11, 1951, 8.

69 “Communists Work behind Screen, Snaring Unwary with Show of ‘Sugar-Coated’ Purposes, Church Leader Says,” *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, July 23, 1948, 2; “Communist Menace Described by Speaker,” *Hattiesburg (MS) American*, March 22, 1948, 13; George W. Robnett, *News and Views* [hereafter *NV*], no. 154 (January 1945): 1–3, emphasis in original; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 180 (January 1948): 1; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 188 (November 1948): 1; Lees, “Speaker Says Immigration Law,” 9.

70 *What Is the Church League of America?* (Wheaton, IL: Church League of America, n.d.), 2, 5, emphasis in original; John George and Laird Wilcox, *Nazis, Communists, Klansmen, and Others on the Fringe: Political Extremism in America* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 234; Robnett to Herbert Hoover,

At a meeting hosted by the CLA in 1940, the businessman Sterling Morton assailed the trend toward “mob rule” under the New Deal. The heir to a family salt empire, Morton was a militant nationalist conservative and intransigent anti-interventionist who played a central role in the America First Committee. An ally of Robnett, Garett Garrett, Merwin Hart, Jasper Crane, Upton Close, Samuel Pettengill, William F. Buckley Jr., and Robert E. Wood, Morton contributed to an array of conservative organizations, including the CLA, the Committee for Constitutional Government, Hart’s NEC, American Action, and the early 1950’s *Freeman*, the influential conservative periodical.⁷¹ Morton attacked the “lawless dictatorship” of the New Deal, which aimed, he believed, for the “complete annihilation of the freedom of action of the individual in business, [and the] complete control of all means of production by the government.” He decried the Marshall Plan and foreign aid as a prelude to socialism in America. He embodied the philosophy of many of the former anti-interventionists, Wood and Hart among them, who decried overseas military adventures but believed that the Soviets posed an existential armed threat to the United States. Such a worldview, as exemplified neatly by a letter Morton wrote to Robert McCormick in 1947, flirted with contradiction. “Either we should decide to stay home and mind our own business,” he wrote, “or we should stop them where we really can, in Moscow!”⁷² At the same meeting that hosted Morton, the CLA launched its campaign for the 1940 election. The issues of the campaign, Robnett argued, were perfectly clear. The New Dealers aimed for more federal spending, more regulation of business, and greater centralization of government power. “That program,” he wrote, “is anathema to every liberty loving citizen.”⁷³

Robnett’s letters to allies were typically long, rambling, and slightly fevered, as if written passionately at great speed. The same tone, breathless and emphatic, marked his *News and Views* bulletins. “If there is anything that truly reflects the spirit of the Divine

December 30, 1941, PPIC, box 194, HHP; Forster and Epstein, *Danger On the Right*, 145; “New Deal Target of Church League,” *New York Times*, September 2, 1940, 13; Robnett to Kenneth W. Colegrove, October 12, 1958, box 31, Kenneth W. Colegrove Papers, Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, IA.

71 “Warns against Mob Rule Trend of New Policies,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 20, 1940, 9; “Morton, Art Patron, Dies in California,” *Chicago Tribune*, February 25, 1961, P3–11; Robnett to Morton, April 26, 1947, box 9, SMP; Morton to Garrett, August 16, 1948, box 11, SMP; Crane to Morton, July 1, 1946, box 9, SMP; Fred G. Clark to J. Howard Pew, October 27, 1941, box 211, JHPP; Morton to *Human Events*, August 7, 1946, box 8, SMP; Pettengill to Morton, August 23, 1950, box 12, SMP; Morton to Buckley, August 5, 1957, box 51, SMP; Morton to Wood, November 30, 1948, and Morton to Isaac Don Levine, July 27, 1949, box 11, SMP.

72 “Sterling Morton Asserts His Famed Ancestor Wouldn’t Have Been in Accord with New Deal,” *The Lincoln (NE) Star*, November 18, 1935, 4; “Another Morton Shakes the Salt,” *The Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, WA), May 17, 1959, 4; Morton to McCormick, March 31, 1947, box 9, SMP.

73 “Warns Against Mob Rule Trend of New Policies,” 9; “Church League Warns Pastors of Polls Crisis,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 2, 1940, 2; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 18 (n.d.): 4.

on earth—it is that indefinable effervescence of protoplasmic energy and expression that we call the human EGO,” he wrote in 1945. “Everything we have . . . is directly traceable to and dependent upon that irrepressible mechanism of human thought and action which certain highly organized forces now seek to sacrifice on the glorified altar of Statism.”⁷⁴ Free enterprise, for Robnett, was simply the “natural” consequence of a “free people establishing a free society in a new world,” its hierarchies the product of nature’s laws. In this vision, capitalism was not a primitive contest between capital and labor, but a world-historical agent of human emancipation.⁷⁵

By the 1950s, Robnett’s nationalist conservatism had hardened. Increasingly preoccupied by nativist fears, Robnett came to regard immigration as the central threat to the American republic. In a contribution to Hart’s *Council Letter*, Robnett unspooled the elements of his nativist thought. Throughout the nineteenth century, he argued, America had risen to economic supremacy on the back of the “Christian founders and their blood stock.” By the turn of the twentieth century, though, a new influx of “aliens” from eastern Europe had flooded the country, fundamentally altering the racial and ideological character of the nation. “[T]his mass inflow,” he argued, “brought many problems,” including a strand of “militant socialism” that would ultimately spread its tentacles across the body politic. The Immigration Act of 1924 established racial quotas, limiting the flow of immigrants from eastern Europe, but the coming of the New Deal, he argued, brought about a breakdown of restrictions. By the late 1940s, a deluge of immigrant “Jews” had been admitted into America. “Many of them—no can know how many,” he wrote, “have become taxpayer burdens.” The crisis, he maintained, was acute, the threat imminent and grave. Only an “alert citizenry,” who would force the government to revise the nation’s immigration laws, could halt the destructive flow of immigrants once and for all.⁷⁶

Robnett’s growing relationship with Hart was of a piece with the shared trajectory of their political thought. While Robnett eschewed outright antisemitism in his bulletins, by the tail end of his career he had embraced a wholly racialized conception of political and social life. “Of all human kind the Jew is the greatest enigma,” he wrote to an acquaintance in 1961, “and the super-problem of all civilization.” Robnett regarded the estimate of six million Jewish victims of the Holocaust as a “fantastic figure.” “I am trying to get together as much authentic information as I can concerning the Jews that were killed by the Nazi program,” he wrote. “The 6,000,000 myth is repeated over and over.” Hart, for his part, echoed this theme. “[I]f there were 6,000,000 Jews within reach

74 George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 154 (January 1945): 1.

75 George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 146 (February 1944): 1–2; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 60 (n.d.): 1; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 200 (February 1950): 1, emphasis in original removed; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 61 (n.d.): 1; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 6 (n.d.): 3; George W. Robnett, *NV*, no. 189 (February 1949): 1.

76 George W. Robnett, *ECL*, no. 444 (December 1958): 1–4.

of Hitler, which number is widely questioned, and if they have all disappeared, where are they?" he asked in 1961. "Is it not likely that many of these 6,000,000 claimed to have been killed by Hitler and Eichmann are right here in the United States and are now joining in the agitation for more and more support for the state of Israel—even if the American Republic goes down?"⁷⁷

Robnett believed that the principle strength of the conservative movement lay in the sheer variety of organizations on the right. Hart, though, was of a different mind. Obsessed by the dream of a grand coalition of conservative organizations, he sought a union of patriotic forces that could combat the tide of "socialist" legislation emanating from Washington. Hart's goal was to organize a united front of conservative groups, a nationalist coalition directed by a policy committee. "Some may say that it is too late to undertake this," he wrote in 1949. But "at the present time almost anybody will undertake to respond, if he has the slightest conception . . . of the dangers with which the Republic is confronted."⁷⁸ No coalition of this type was ever effectuated, despite Hart's efforts. And in the end, by the late 1950s, it was Hart who increasingly found himself marginalized from the conservative movement. The toxic antisemitism and virulent nativism that defined his late work were shared by few conservatives, outside of a coterie who remained wedded to his conspiratorial visions. And by the early 1960s, many of Hart's erstwhile allies, eager to expand the conservative coalition, had abandoned him.

Conclusion

In the end, the nationalist conservatism that assailed Zionists and "alien" refugees could not flourish in the postwar climate of unparalleled affluence, declining "structural" antisemitism (i.e., policies limiting the admittance and influence of Jews in areas of American public life), and minimal immigration, in which an emerging generation of conservative activists repudiated antisemitism, in particular, as politically toxic. In time, as a result in part of the exigencies of an "internationalist" confrontation with the Soviet Union, extreme Cold War anticommunism displaced nativism, antisemitism, and anti-interventionism as the dominant ideological "glue" of conservatism. Nationalism, though, stripped of many of its bigoted associations, remained a potent force on the conservative right. An antipathy toward the web of "internationalist" organizations, and

77 Robnett to Robert Donner, January 12 and February 19, 1961, and January 16, 1960, box 2, George Washington Robnett Papers, Kenneth Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS; "Merwin K. Hart of Birch Society," *New York Times*, December 2, 1962, 88.

78 Robnett to Verne P. Kaub, December 2, 1949, box 1, American Council of Christian Laymen Records, Wisconsin Historical Society, Madison, WI; MKH to Brice P. Disque, April 21, 1948, in *HSCLA*, 117; MKH, memo, March 8, 1949, in *HSCLA*, 436–38. See also MKH to Bonner Fellers, June 1, 1955, box 8, folder 13, MKHP.

a belief in the inviolable primacy of American sovereignty, remained integral elements of the philosophy of conservatism. And as conservatism began to coalesce, in the mid-1950s, into a distinct and internally coherent movement, the principles of a revised nationalism would come to animate the work of a new generation of activists and intellectuals.

What was the ultimate significance of the nationalist conservative movement? Perhaps, in a longer historical perspective, we can see its pairing of bigotry and nationalism as a central strain of conservative ideology in America, a mode displaced for forty-five years by the *sui generis* demands of the Cold War. The absence of wholesale xenophobia from the mainstream of Cold War conservatism, in this view, can be seen as a product of a unique historical conjuncture, which swiftly evaporated—as evidenced by the Republican primary campaigns of Pat Buchanan in 1992 and 1996—after the dissolution of the USSR. From this perspective, Hart and his allies can be better seen as carriers of a type of conservatism, first honed in the struggle with the New Deal, that lay in abeyance for forty-five years, and then reemerged, with its essential spirit intact, in our own time.

ARTICLE

The Masculinities and Emotions of Men Going Their Own Way

An Ethnographic Study on the MGTOW Reddit Forum

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Abstract: *The manosphere consists of numerous anti-feminist websites, blogs, and online forums that are now widely considered misogynistic and male supremacist. Among the heterogeneous manosphere groups is the gender-separatist Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW). This article recounts a four-week digital ethnographic study that investigated the emotional and relational dynamics of the Reddit MGTOW forum. I found that rage and fear toward women are central to MGTOW users, as users worked together to reinterpret their feelings of rage and fear to construct a shared narrative that positions women as perpetrators. This worldview obscures the important role masculine ideology plays in male loneliness and disconnection. Giving advice and emotional support on the forum cultivated a sense of belonging and provided a space for men to navigate feelings of loneliness, frustration, and social displacement. Ultimately, MGTOW users expressed a desire to transcend restrictive gender ideals such as husband and father, yet paradoxically still adhered to a conservative, essentialized, and hierarchical gender order. MGTOW users thus performed hybrid masculinity, as they self-conceptualized as victims of society and simultaneously upheld preexisting gender hierarchies that situate femininity as biologically inferior. This study offers a new insight into the magnetism of anti-feminist groups like MGTOW and the ways digital platforms like Reddit amplify such harmful and antagonistic worldviews. Overall, this article highlights the importance of unpacking the affectionate and positive relationships within extremist groups to help explain the emergence into mainstream discourse of male supremacy and an increase of misogynistic beliefs concerning masculinity, femininity, and feminism.*

Keywords: manosphere, MGTOW, digital ethnography, masculinity, emotion, male supremacy.

Since the early 2000s, groups of men across the globe have gathered in online spaces referred to as the “manosphere” to deal with the supposed oppression men face in contemporary society. Angry about what they interpret as systemic disadvantages in the home, workplace, and courtroom, manosphere subgroups gather across niche online forums and major social media platforms to deal with the perceived “gynocentrism”

of society.¹ For instance, pick-up artists share ritualistic and intimidating techniques to pursue female sexual conquests (Jane 2018, 666), and incels coalesce around their shared experiences of sexlessness and loneliness (Kimmel 2013; Witt 2020). The “red pill,” a term appropriated from the 1999 film *The Matrix*, purports to “awaken men to feminism’s misandry and brainwashing” (Ging 2019, 640) and is the underlying philosophy of many manosphere communities. At its core, the red pill posits women as biologically evil and draws on hand-picked theories from biological determinism and evolutionary psychology to justify its claims (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022, 13).

Men Going Their Own Way (MGTOW) is one such red pill subgroup within online manosphere spaces concerned with male oppression. MGTOW uniquely promotes a separatist philosophy: adherents are encouraged to live self-empowered lives away from women to prioritize their finances, hobbies, and careers. Self-preservation and personal development are pursued by avoiding romantic and sexual relationships, reducing contact with women, and sometimes even practicing celibacy (Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020, 910). This article focuses on the main site of MGTOW activity, [reddit.com/r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW), which peaked in 2021 with over 100,000 users and 600,000 posts. In August 2021, shortly after this research was conducted, Reddit banned [r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) for breaking the site’s policies against the promotion of violence and hate (ADL 2024). Despite the closure of the subreddit, this article still offers crucial knowledge about how similar male supremacist beliefs become normalized in contemporary gender discourse (Solea and Sugiura 2023, 315).

In recent years, incels have gained public attention for their extremist beliefs (BBC 2019; Zand 2022) and have been identified as an ongoing terrorist threat (Ware, Hoffman, and Shapiro 2020) for their misogynistic attacks across North America. At least eight mass violence attacks were attributed to the incel ideology by 2022 (Zimmerman 2024, 166). Meanwhile, the violent rhetoric of MGTOW seems to have escaped the attention of mainstream news media. This oversight may be due to MGTOW’s separatist approach to the “male situation,” which could be interpreted as less extreme than other manosphere ideologies. However, the Southern Poverty Law Center (“Men Going Their Own Way,” n.d.) categorizes MGTOW as an extremist male supremacist movement due to its displays of misogyny, homophobia, and transphobia. The MGTOW Reddit community’s active period requires scholarly attention to further understand the popularity of male supremacy and its symbolic and physical violence against women.

Criminological and terrorism studies have linked manosphere engagement with traits of radicalization (Habib, Srinivasan, and Nithyanand 2022) and evaluated the extent of politicization in manosphere discourse (Zimmerman 2024). Other researchers (Decook 2019; Carian, DiBranco, and Kelly 2023) highlight how incel and red pill

1 In the manosphere, gynocentrism refers to the practice of prioritizing women’s needs and perspectives over men’s.

worldviews long for a return to a white and Christian version of patriarchy, which implies the existence of white supremacist, xenophobic, and transphobic systemic ideologies alongside male supremacism. There is a growing body of masculinity studies on incels, including critical discourse analyses and interviews (Daly and Reed 2022; Solea and Sugiura 2023).

There is less research published on MGTOW. Lin (2017, 93) conducted an initial exploration of r/MGTOW participations and routines and found the ideology is primarily “a masculinist reaction to feminism that finds its conclusions in antifeminism, radicalism and anarchism.” Gorska, Kulicka, and Jemielniak (2023) identify a similar anti-feminist and misogynistic orientation to MGTOW on Twitter/X. However, insights from Twitter/X studies cannot fully represent Reddit communities, as the short-form posting style fosters different communication patterns and social dynamics compared to Reddit’s thread-based format.

Interesting findings concerning MGTOW on Reddit are provided by Wright, Trott, and Jones (2020), who found the two most common forum topics were women and rationalizing the MGTOW lifestyle. They found that discussions were mostly civil with little disagreement, a pattern also identified in Trott, Beckett, and Paech’s (2022) quantitative study on the same subreddit. Trott, Beckett, and Paech highlight a high level of internal civility between members despite the high levels of hatred directed toward outsiders. This internal cohesion fostered a sense of belonging through shared emotional connections and fulfilment of users’ needs, which is a strong component in the radicalization process.

While these studies offer important insights into the nature of r/MGTOW topics, ideology, and community health, there are currently no qualitative studies that investigate the construction of internal relationships and the role of emotions on the r/MGTOW subreddit. This article therefore addresses two main research gaps. To begin with, this is the first study to explicitly focus on the role of emotions in the MGTOW community, which scholars of the far right indicate are critical in the construction of cohesion, shared purpose, and meaning in extremist communities (Miller-Idriss 2020, 11). Secondly, manosphere researchers rarely focus on the nature of relationships between insider members. This article brings a new lens to the discussion by analyzing the *positive* relationships between MGTOW members, which will help demonstrate how and why male supremacist communities attract and retain such high numbers of members.

This article presents findings from a virtual ethnographic study on the MGTOW subreddit, r/MGTOW, conducted in 2021. Research was guided by the following questions: 1) *What types of masculinity are constructed on r/MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* 2) *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW?* 3) *What kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?*

After discussing the theoretical framework and methodology, this article discusses three themes from the findings. “Gray Men and Constructions of Masculinity”

deconstructs the ideal MGTOW masculine figure, the “gray man.” The gray man suggests a desire to transcend oppressive gendered social roles yet simultaneously revolves around a traditional and essentialized gender order that paints women and femininity as biologically inferior and dangerous. Users’ appropriation of victimhood suggests they performed a type of hybrid masculinity that claims social marginalization yet reproduces existing gendered power dynamics.

In “Affectionate Relationships and Loneliness,” I look at how supportive masculine relationships on the forum created a welcome atmosphere and seemingly provided an antidote to men’s loneliness. Users traced their suffering to the evil nature of women, which obscured the role of a harmful masculine ideology in experiences of loneliness. “Fear, Rage, and Reddit” examines expressions of fear and rage on the forum, which were communally interpreted to fit their experiences into an existing misogynistic ideology. As such, the MGTOW forum may be considered an *outrage venue* (Berry and Sobieraj 2014) where like-minded individuals gather to hear misogynistic narratives repeated, beliefs cemented, and meaning and legitimacy given to individual suffering. Ultimately, users framed the MGTOW lifestyle, ideology, and community as a solution to men’s isolation, effectively disguising extreme male supremacist rhetoric in an appealing narrative.

Theoretical Framework

Male Privilege and Misogyny

It is useful to begin by understanding what leads discontented men to the manosphere, and how misogyny is articulated inside male supremacist spaces. In the latter half of the twentieth century, women’s widespread entry into the workforce, the breakdown of the traditional labor market, wage stagnation, and the recognition of female, LGBTQ+, and immigrants’ rights (Ging 2019, 652) caused some men to feel displaced. Some articulate this experience of destabilized male privilege as a “crisis of masculinity,” which refers to a perceived social exclusion and racial or gender disadvantage that views women and immigrants as economic and social threats. Studies of the far right give further insight into how the process of deindustrialization gave rise to the alienated and angry white male (Kimmel 2013, 22–26), resulting in exclusionary and dehumanizing ideological beliefs that aim to preserve the superiority and hierarchy of dominant groups (Miller-Idriss 2020).

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that the extent and quality of men’s social relations continue to decline in proportion to women’s, especially within the Global North (Ferrara and Vergara 2024). In the US, this “male loneliness epidemic” has been partially linked to the decrease in social infrastructures, such as churches and clubs, which resulted in an unprecedented increase in loneliness (Putnam 2000). Additionally, studies over the past thirty years have consistently indicated that adherence to and policing of dominant masculine norms disincentivize boys and men from developing intimate and sustained same-gender friendships (Ferrara and Vergara 2024; Campos-

Castillo et al. 2020; Vierra, Beltran, and Robnett 2023). These studies theorize that it is men who pressure one another to adhere to masculine norms such as emotionlessness, heterosexuality, and avoidance of femininity.

In the manosphere, it is common to see men blame women for their experiences of isolation and perceived social oppression (see, for example, Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020; Jane 2018). Such blame is typically expressed through iterations of misogyny such as rape threats and “cum tributes” (Jane 2018, 664).² Manne (2018) explains that misogyny is not an individual social act but a social system that upholds the patriarchal order by punishing women who step outside of patriarchal norms. In other words, men exhibit reactionary anger when the benefits they believed they were entitled to are not delivered (Kimmel 2013, 8).

Misogynistic acts of violence linked to the manosphere can be explained as aggrieved entitlement (Kimmel 2013) in response to the violation of patriarchal norms and expectations (Manne 2018). For example, Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017) found that Elliot Rodger, self-proclaimed incel mass murderer, felt entitled to sexual and romantic privileges and became frustrated when they were not received. For incels, sex with women is the most important entitlement because “failure to have heterosexual sex signals not only sexual incompetency or virginity but also raises suspicions of homosexuality” (4). Similarly, Zimmerman (2024, 174) argues that incels use acts of mass violence to exact revenge on those they believe have wronged them and to temporarily situate themselves as the ultimate hegemonic male.

Masculinity in the Manosphere

Connell and Messerschmidt’s theory of *hegemonic masculinity* involves a hierarchical model topped by an “ideal” man with all privileged attributes—for instance, white, upper class, able-bodied, and straight. The term encompasses not a physical description of a fixed transhistorical model but an abstract category of dominating characteristics. Hegemonic constructions of masculinity do not necessarily correspond closely to men’s actual lives. What is most important is the relational nature of the concept and how it is associated with other identities (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, 838). Four further conceptions of masculinity sit below the hegemonic: complicit masculinity is not hegemonic but realizes some benefits of gender relations; subordinate masculinity encompasses deviant, effeminate identities; marginalized masculinities are those trivialized or discriminated against; and lastly, protest masculinities are compensatory hypermasculinities that are formed in reaction to a lack of economic or social power. Hegemonic and subordinate masculinities are contextually dependent and “shape a sense of what is ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ gendered behavior” (Messerschmidt 2019, 90).

² Ejaculating onto a printed image of a woman and sharing evidence online, often for degradation.

Hybrid masculinity is a concept elaborated by Bridges and Pascoe (2014), an idealized masculinity different from hegemonic masculinity. By selectively incorporating performances and identity elements usually associated with marginalized and subordinated identities (such as ethnic minorities or women), hybrid masculinities allow men to strategically situate their identity away from hegemonic masculinity. Hybrid masculinities are sometimes celebrated for challenging traditional gender norms, but, ultimately, they still uphold patriarchal systems of power (Bridges and Pascoe 2014, 251). For example, feminist men who perform emotional sensitivity yet still reproduce structural inequalities through sexist or homophobic jokes.

Literature on masculinity in the manosphere varies in specifying which models of masculinity are performed. Ghumkhor and Mir (2022, 147) believe that the manosphere assumes “a shared masculinity that cuts across cultures and faiths” as the “crisis of masculinity transcends acute political, economic, and social differences.” In contrast, Solea and Sugiura (2023) remark how diverse manifestations of masculinity are performed within different manosphere groups: while men’s rights activists (MRAs) perform exaggerated hegemonic masculinity, incels are more contradictory and adopt a marginalized depiction of masculinity. Alternatively, Vito, Admire, and Hughes (2017, 90) find that incels are not genuinely social deviants but in fact overconform to dominant conceptions of hegemonic masculinity. Perhaps Ging (2019, 62) is most accurate in mapping manosphere gender performances. Her systematic review across the heterogenous manosphere finds that men adopt hegemonic masculinity when it suits them, and distance themselves from the concept when they wish to appear or feel socially marginalized.

Manosphere literature suggests a diversity of gender expressions and performances. Research question 1 asks: *What kinds of masculinities are constructed on r/MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* This article adds to the gender and manosphere discussion by focusing on how MGTOW on Reddit relates to broader cultural perceptions of hegemonic masculinity.

Emotions in Digital Cultures

Scholars of extremism and the far right recognize affect and emotion as driving forces of hateful digital cultures, attracting and binding members together through compelling sentimental narratives (Witt 2020; Ahmed 2004; Deem 2019; Ganesh 2020). Affect is the precognitive bodily experience that precedes emotion, whereas emotion can be understood as the conscious means of translating affect into the (socialized) language of the mind (Papacharissi 2015). Papacharissi emphasizes the role of affect and emotion within political subcultures: the phrase “affective publics” refers to networked communities that are mobilized and connected through expressions of sentiment. It is important to acknowledge that affective flows online are not fleeting but remain resonant with members even after specific links or content disappear (9).

Like Papacharissi, Ahmed (2004, 20) points out that “affect does not reside in an object or sign, but is . . . the circulation between objects and signs,” working to align individuals within communities through the strength of their collective attachments. It is the alignment with the collective that brings the individual into being. Ahmed argues that the far right is fueled not by hatred and frustration but by love and protectionism, which is channeled as hatred toward the other. While Ahmed suggests examples from nationalist and white supremacist communities, this theory also applies to male supremacist groups and can help us understand how the circulation of affect does not simply inspire hate and anger toward women but also cultivates a shared sense of purpose, cohesion, and belonging (Miller-Idriss 2020, 11).

According to Kimmel (2013, 36), the emotions of American masculine communities do not occur organically but are consciously constructed by the *outrage media*. Berry and Sobieraj (2014) explain how the outrage media aims to provoke emotional responses in audiences through overgeneralizations, sensationalism, inaccurate information, and the vilification of opponents. The outrage economy is an outcome of regulatory and technological changes to the media landscape that make this content profitable. Outrage discourse takes up residence in “outrage venues,” where similar-minded attendants hear their values rearticulated in convincing ways through vocabulary and styles of delivery familiar to them (Berry and Sobieraj 2014, 8). This theory is particularly applicable to Reddit. The site’s “karma” system allows each user to upvote or downvote a post or comment, translating to a “karma score” for the original poster. Reddit’s algorithm then prioritizes highly upvoted posts on the subreddit’s homepage—including “popular” and “hot” feeds—which tend to be more extreme, sensationalist, and value-affirming content. In contrast, posts and comments with more nuanced or oppositional viewpoints tend to be downvoted, limiting their visibility. As explained by Massanari (2017), this “karmic” voting system functions within Reddit’s “attention economy,” which encourages toxic cultures to proliferate.

Papacharissi’s (2015) and Ahmed’s (2004) theories suggest that tracing the circulation of affect and emotion helps us understand the collective magnetism of manosphere communities. The concepts of outrage media and outrage venues (Berry and Sobieraj 2014) include the role of the platform in explaining how hateful communities coalesce around emotion-laden issues. So far, the role of emotion in community building has been explored in incel communities (Witt 2020) but not in MGTOW. Research questions 2 and 3 address this gap: *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW? And what kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?*

Site Description

Manosphere groups concerned with male oppression, like MGTOW, can be traced to men’s liberation movements from the 1970s that criticized traditional masculinity (Ging 2019). Ribeiro et al. (2021) suggest that members of older men’s rights groups

(such as pick-up artists and men's rights activists) gradually migrated to alternative and more extreme subsets of the manosphere. This explains why the newer MGTOW community was the most active and popular manosphere group, particularly after [reddit.com/r/Incels](https://www.reddit.com/r/Incels) was banned in late 2017 (Ribeiro et al. 2021). The user base of [reddit.com/r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) grew steadily after its 2011 launch and reached over six hundred thousand posts by 2020 (Wright, Trott, and Jones 2020). MGTOW communities used a complicated insider language that is shared across similar manosphere sites, with naturalistic and deterministic lingo to explain their social oppression, such as “alpha” and “beta” men and “hypergamous” females.

The MGTOW subreddit used the same user interface as all other subreddits hosted on the parent site, Reddit. The forum's self-description read: “This subreddit is for men going their own way, forging their own identities and paths to self-defined success.”³ There were ten forum rules that aimed to sustain peaceful interactions, keep the forum content relevant, and avoid any content that could harm the subreddit's perceived legitimacy. When this research was conducted in 2021, the community was “quarantined” by Reddit. This meant posts were excluded from the Reddit homepage “popular” feeds, searches, and recommendations, and users attempting to enter the subreddit were first required to agree to view offensive content.⁴ The quarantine of [r/MGTOW](https://www.reddit.com/r/MGTOW) in December 2018 was probably due to the Southern Poverty Law Center's classification of MGTOW as a male supremacist ideology (“Male Supremacy,” n.d.).

Methods

Throughout April and May 2021, I undertook a virtual ethnography of the Reddit MGTOW forum. In virtual ethnography, the researcher observes a forum that evolves in real time and participates in the group cultures to gain insider meanings and feelings (Hine 2000). This enables the researcher to access the unique insider experiences—making sense of a messy arrival of comments and posts, waiting for responses, and encountering periods of high and low activity—in the same way an insider would. The advantages over content analysis were plentiful: I noticed smaller details such as changes in mood, reported or deleted content, and hidden threads that would not appear in a keyword archive search. I treated the field as a living and shifting space instead of a data store, as the virtual field was a place where things happened, identities were formed, and understandings of the world were contested.

Conducting research into the manosphere entails risks that may increase after work is published, so methodological choices must be thoughtful and anticipatory (Massanari

3 See “[r/MGTOW Stats](https://subredditsstats.com/r/MGTOW),” Subreddit Stats, accessed April 7, 2025, <https://subredditsstats.com/r/MGTOW>.

4 See “[Quarantined Communities](https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Communities),” Reddit Help Center, accessed April 22, 2025, <https://support.reddithelp.com/hc/en-us/articles/360043069012-Quarantined-Communities>.

2018). Hine (2000) advises that if there are significant risks of harm to the researcher, sometimes the “lurker” position in virtual ethnography is preferable (see also Kozinets 2010). A lurker can become invisible like all other forum users while still actively reading and participating in the temporal experiences of the community (Hine 2000, 48). In my case, being a lurker alleviated some risks for a female researcher participating in a misogynistic community. Nevertheless, it did not mean I was a passive observer during the research: I was, to some extent, a participant—sharing the concerns, emotions, and commitments of the research subjects (47). To expose myself to the MGTOW community lifestyle, I also listened to MGTOW podcasts and interviews and read tweets from MGTOW accounts.

I began with a two-week familiarization phase by visiting various Reddit forums and watching manosphere YouTube videos. This was followed by four weeks watching, anticipating, and experiencing emotional reactions as forum discussions unfolded every day on reddit.com/r/MGTOW. As a relational ethnographer (Desmond 2014) I paid attention to the relations between the community members: the tensions, conflicts, friendships, and hierarchies occurring in the MGTOW ecosphere. I browsed forum threads based on their activity level and their number of “upvotes.” The most popular and active posts were easy to navigate as Reddit allows users to select the “top posts” from the “past 24 hours,” “past seven days,” “past month,” or “ever.” This was a helpful feature as posts on r/MGTOW per day would reach up to fifty and comments per day over five hundred.⁵

At the end of the study period, all data were categorized into four groups: elicited (textual data taken directly from the forum observation), archival (preexisting and filtered for relevance), fieldnotes (my observations, interpretations, and reflections), and contextual (e.g., YouTube, articles, and podcasts). To ensure forum users’ privacy and keep with the forum’s anonymity, all discussions referring to specific individuals have personal details redacted.

Results and Discussion

“Gray Men” and Masculinity

Many MGTOW users self-identified as or aspired to become a *gray man*. The gray man represented the highest adherence to the MGTOW lifestyle and avoided all unnecessary social encounters to pass through life undetected and trouble free. As one user described it, a gray man “maintains a low profile and seeks shelter within himself and his close environment.”⁶ Users frequently discussed the gray man philosophy and lifestyle. What was most intriguing about the gray man was the freedom it gave men to pursue their

5 “r/MGTOW Stats.”

6 All r/MGTOW quotes are presented as originally posted, with no corrections made to spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

own hobbies and form identities without the “shackles” of traditional fatherhood and marriage. Living an independent gray life was admired because it allowed one to explore hobbies, see the world, and enjoy an early retirement. This was summarized by one user, who remarked, “when I got divorced it took about three months for it to dawn on me that I can keep my pet snakes in the living room. I don’t have to keep them in the garage anymore lol.” In opposition to the freedom afforded to a gray man, users pointed out how other submissive and modern men “would not make the profits they could or even went out of business because their girlfriend or wife demanded so much time from them.”

MGTOW’s gray man enlightenment was a double-edged sword: it exposed the frustrating “truth” of gynocentrism but also presented men with the choice to adjust their lives accordingly. As expressed by one user, “we’re about freedom, and that freedom includes the option of going back to the plantation as a slave.” The slave on the plantation refers to a man who adheres to mainstream masculine expectations. For example, the worst imaginable scenario for most users was a settled life with children and a wife, who would drain their time and finances, restrict their livelihoods, and inevitably betray or abandon them. One user emphasized the importance of pursuing a life with the goal of “retir[ing] at the age of 30–40 . . . marriage and [kids] will only get in the way of this and so would trying to date for sex or a relationship.”

At first glance, the high regard for gray men in the MGTOW forum might suggest a progressive attempt to reject traditional expectations of masculinity. Living as a gray man is a refusal and critique of family gender roles, as users viewed fatherhood and marriage as dangerous for their finances, health, and well-being. One user wrote, “we serve as sperm banks and ATMs to women, and that is all we are to them.” Nevertheless, as I will demonstrate below, the independent and liberated gray man philosophy is limited in its challenge of masculinity and patriarchy considering how the gray man’s attributes reaffirm wider cultural notions of a patriarchal gender order.

MGTOW users still subscribed to a conservative, traditional, and dichotomous understanding of gender. The “true” male nature, epitomized by the gray man, was associated with aggression, intelligence, physical strength, and self-sufficiency. One user recalled how, during a difficult childhood, “I had to cut my own branches, pitch my own tent and brew my own coffee. I never received any helping-hand, nor did anyone really care what became of me.” Desirable masculine values and qualities like these were defined in opposition to undesirable masculine values, a division that also reflected the symbolic division between MGTOW and all other men. One user reflected how modern men “can’t make decisions / they are not loyal, they are afraid of everything, they cower to others that show any strength, they see strength as a weakness.” Another user remarked, “I still have a few guy friends but for the most part most men lack ethics and drive to be men.” Despite the critique of gendered expectations offered by the gray man philosophy, this dichotomous view of masculinity reflects adherence to broader gender structures that give meaning to masculine characteristics by situating them in opposition to an inferior femininity (Messerschmidt 2019). In other words, if the gray

man is the MGTOW masculine ideal, it only derives such status via comparison with an undesirable, exaggerated femininity (Messerschmidt 2019).

As for portrayals and expectations of women, MGTOW users often reminisced about the (imagined) women of a nostalgic patriarchal past, who were moral, monogamous, and modest. One user remarked how, “if society somehow got its culture back to monogamy, a lot of the issues with modern women would disappear.” Compared to the respectable women of the past, participants regarded the modern-day woman as promiscuous, deceptive, and scheming. This generally negative view of women was often legitimized through the language of pseudoscience, which judged women on their utility or danger to men. For example, as one user commented:

You just have to expect hypergamy, Briffaults Law, monkey branching and cheating. That’s the package deal, it’s the nature of what you’re dealing with. It’s no different from a cat sharpening its claws on your furniture. That’s what they [women] do. It’s their nature and you’ll never prevent it.

Hypergamy refers to the tendency for women to marry above their social status, education, or income. Briffault’s law says that the female has the power to establish relationships, depending on whether they benefit her or not. Monkey branching is the act of women secretly lining up potential romantic interests. The use of these pseudoscientific theories not only answers men’s complex feelings of displacement, anxiety, and frustration, but also seems to legitimize hateful rhetoric.

Similar to my observations of MGTOW users, incels also demonstrate a dichotomous view of masculinity and use a lexicon of pseudoscience in their vilification of women. Despite self-identifying as deviant and low on the gender hierarchy (Daly and Reed 2022), incels, research suggests, subscribe to wider hegemonic masculine traits such as excessive aggression (O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022) and success in the heterosexual marketplace. Incels situate the alpha or zeta male as superordinate (both of whom excel in social and sexual pursuits),⁷ whereas MGTOW users refuse sex and relationships, preferring gray man independence. How can we compare constructions of hegemonic masculinity in two ideologically different manosphere groups? MGTOW users pursue a separatist lifestyle and avoid sexual or romantic relationships with women, which suggests that—unlike incels—their gender performances deviate from Western hegemonic masculinities that emphasize sexual prowess. In fact, an accomplished and respectable gray man rejects women in all spheres, including romantic, social, professional, and even familial ties. While both groups construct masculinity in opposition to inferior femininity, incels frame their struggle around exclusion from heterosexual success, whereas MGTOW users redefine masculine achievement through deliberate withdrawal: illustrating two different responses to the perceived failures of modern gender relations.

⁷ Zeta males are a new type of “sociosexual warrior” who transcend the apparent gynocentric social hierarchy (Ging 2019, 650).

Research question 1 asked: *What types of masculinity are constructed in MGTOW, and to what extent do gender constructions challenge broader systemic values?* On the surface, the MGTOW gray man philosophy suggests a desire to transcend broader systemic masculine roles and give men freedom to pursue their own identity configurations away from the restrictions of marriage and childrearing. But illustrations of gendered subjects within the forum were still binary, traditional, and misogynistic. MGTOW users thus presented a contradiction: their worldview was structured squarely around traditional superior hegemonic masculinity and biologically inferior femininity, yet they challenged and critiqued typical traditional masculine characteristics and expectations. The MGTOW worldview misguidedly attributes the harmful impacts of patriarchal family values back to the biological, moral, and intellectual inferiority of women rather than the system of patriarchy, which structures expectations for men in the romantic and family sphere.

Therefore, rather than understanding MGTOW users as overconforming to hegemonic masculine ideals (Vito, Admire, and Hughes 2017), it is more accurate to understand users as enacting a *hybrid* form of masculinity (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). This involves selectively incorporating performances usually associated with marginalized or alternative identities. The MGTOW users performance of victimhood and its adherents' refusal of sexual or romantic pursuits present an alternative masculinity that, however, does not challenge existing powers and structures of inequality. Hybrid masculinity means MGTOW men can strategically appear outside of hegemonic masculinity, masking the profits they reap from their superordinate position in the gender hierarchy (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Casting themselves as *victims* of an oppressive gender order excuses and normalizes misogynistic MGTOW narratives and absolves users of responsibility for symbolic or literal harm to women.

One might wonder why men in the manosphere lean toward patriarchal and misogynistic gender views rather than construct alternative or less harmful masculinities that would allow them to further transcend restrictive patriarchal expectations. Manne (2018) explains how misogyny is fundamentally an act of punishing women for perceived violations of the patriarchal code. From the MGTOW perspective, women prevented full enjoyment of men's independence and livelihoods, which was a perceived infringement on their rights as men. For example, women who did not allow their husbands to keep snakes in the house, or women who won custody of children in court cases, were fundamentally disobeying patriarchal values that taught men to expect superiority and certain privileges in their romantic and family lives. Not finding such expectations met explains the retaliatory misogyny that sought to restore the traditional patriarchal order by "inflicting hostile or adverse social consequences on women" to enforce desirable gendered social norms (Manne 2018, 13).

Affectionate Relationships and Loneliness

A striking observation from the ethnography was a high frequency of supportive, affectionate, and caring posts and comments. To understand the magnetism of the

forum, it is insightful to examine r/MGTOW's most popular type of interaction: advice and emotional support.

MGTOW users often demonstrated affection toward fellow users and offered advice to those experiencing hardship. In response to a post about a user struggling with grief after losing his father, responses offered companionship, such as "If you want to talk I'm here man, but rest assured your father is in a very very loving place." In other cases, support was offered in the form of financial advice. For example, men encouraged entrepreneurship and investment for early retirement in the hope of giving other members financial freedom from the oppression of family life: "Live your own life, man. These ladies generally major in stupid shit and rack up a ton of debt. Work your ass off and build some chips to have a happy and amazing life down the road." One user poetically termed their community a brotherhood: "I see us as the beginning of another brotherhood of warriors of the mind, that savors truth and wisdom from all sources, like mountain springs, and we are becoming a river."

The supportive and affectionate atmosphere on r/MGTOW came with a strict delineation of insiders versus outsiders, reinforcing feelings of community cohesion. There was an extensive list of outsiders that MGTOW users viewed as antagonistic to their cause, such as feminine men, feminists, trans people, and women. For example, one user stated, "male feminists are almost always massive shitbags in real life," and another believed the MGTOW lifestyle "terrifies the feminine, females, soyboys etc because it means you don't care . . . if they live or die." Another user warned others to expect that "minorities and transgenders [will] get free money off your tax dollars in the next five-ten years." In this sense, the MGTOW forum was not simply a masculine space: racial, sexual, and political identities were also negotiated, policed, and excluded.

The masculine-coded and exclusive MGTOW brotherhood was a sanctuary for men who felt lonely in an increasingly "feminized" society. One user claimed that, through giving advice, "the red pill and MGTOW are saving lives." The emotional and social support on r/MGTOW was likely a critical factor in its ability to attract and maintain members. Indeed, one user stated, "Ok I may be only 17 and my life hasn't started yet but I oddly feel welcome here with y'all. Being a straight white male is rough these days. But I feel welcome." Young men experiencing loneliness perceived r/MGTOW as a welcoming and supportive community that could alleviate their suffering and give direction to complex feelings.

Users often traced these experiences of loneliness to the same source: women. One user, reflecting on his new job, remarked, "I kinda miss my male dominant, blue-collar job because I could talk about anything with the fellas." This was one of many indications that men experienced a lack of (offline) male friendships and were frustrated with the encroachment of women into previously male-dominated spaces. Manne (2018, 108) explains that the angry male response to the increased female presence in male spaces is one manifestation of how men believe they are entitled to masculine-coded perks. Not receiving these masculine-coded perks is the cause of misogynistic retaliation against women. In this sense, frustration with the lack of male-only spaces and exclusion of

women, queer, or feminine people from the MGTOW forum signal a belief that women should not compete with men for male-dominated spaces (Manne 2018, 114).

The frequent displays of affection and support in the MGTOW forum require a deeper understanding of the “epidemic of male loneliness.” Psychological and sociological studies indicate that a greater adherence to masculine norms and conservative gender values cause a deterioration in close male friendships (Vierra, Beltran, and Robnett 2023; Campos-Castillo et al. 2020; Botha and Bower 2024). In other words, the rigid patriarchal structures that instruct men to socialize in restrictive ways lead to a large number of men reporting loneliness and few close friends (“Men’s Health Survey” 2018). The MGTOW worldview neglects to confront the oppressive gender order that plays a role in male loneliness and, instead, deflects blame onto women. While the MGTOW forum may seem like a supportive venue for lonely and suffering men, the antagonistic worldview it promoted—where women are evil perpetrators causing men’s suffering—reinforced an exclusionary ideology that further isolated its members from society and ignored the role that gender constructions play in their negative experiences.

Research question 2 asked: *How are insider relationships established on r/MGTOW?* Like the work of Trott, Beckett, and Paech (2022), my findings about the affectionate nature of interactions suggest that the welcoming atmosphere masks the extremist potential of MGTOW rhetoric. Rather than addressing how a strict adherence to traditional masculinity is a lead cause in the male loneliness epidemic, MGTOW users blamed members’ struggles on external factors like the feminization of masculine spaces. Ultimately, the highly civil nature of forums like r/MGTOW highlights how emotional support within extremist groups entices newcomers and presents harmful ideologies as a simple and logical explanation for complex feelings of displacement, isolation, and frustration. While giving advice and emotional support foster a sense of belonging in the MGTOW brotherhood, r/MGTOW remained an explicitly masculine-coded space that reinforced patriarchal ideals and sustained exclusion of outsiders, including women, feminists, and trans people.

Rage, Fear, and Reddit

On r/MGTOW, expressions of anger toward society were common and often conveyed through aggressive or violent language. For example, one user remarked that he felt “a mix of disgust and rage everytime [he] saw couples.” Interestingly, individual posts expressing frustration, anger, and exhaustion were often confirmed, reinterpreted, or redirected by other users through the comment thread. For instance, in the example below, the exchange begins with user 1’s frustration with his perceived low social position. You can see in the replies how users offer reinterpretations of his emotional experience: user 2 suggests that what user 1 is experiencing is similar to his exclusion from society; and user 3 suggests that what they are experiencing is a sadistic nihilism toward an idiotic external society. This example depicts the first central communal emotion on MGTOW—*rage*.

User 1: I've joined the Manosphere only in the last 5 months, initially I remember being fucking furious about how society has been pulling one over us the entire time and now I'd say I'm somewhere between denial and bargaining.⁸

User 2: You are not alone. As I get older my desire to interact with people decreases, and it wasn't high to begin with.

User 3: I think that is your brain protecting yourself from the idiocy in clown world these days.⁹ Everywhere you look in the media is some incredibly stupid thing going on that will likely negatively impact you in some way . . . they are their own worst enemies and soon they will create a world we all fucking hate, then most of those useless idiots will die when society collapses, good riddance.

This shows how negative emotions were not individual expressions but more like group projects: they were collaboratively reworked and given meaning and direction through MGTOW interpretations of society and mutual reinforcement of certain emotions.

Alongside rage at the immoral world, there were also many expressions of *fear* of the future. For MGTOW users, being a man inevitably came with significant risks, which I coded into three categories of fear. Firstly, one of the biggest fears was the anxiety of being socially outcast: "women can destroy you socially as well by manipulating your friends and family into hating you." Secondly, many were afraid of the family court, which they viewed as naturally biased toward women and therefore having the power to strip a man of his hard-earned assets. As one user put it, "the court system[s] in most (if not all countries) are biased against men and if she is just done with you you can lose alot of what you have rightly earned." And lastly, the fear of emotional pain or betrayal by a female partner provoked fear in MGTOW members because "women can destroy you emotionally, they know how to reach inside your heart, mind and soul and destroy you and they won't hesitate to do anything in their power to keep you in line." These three types of fear have something in common: women are always the source of the fear, whether it be through their betrayal, their infliction of emotional pain, or their accusation of sexual assault.

Ahmed (2004) argues that far-right fears are concerned with the loss of an object. Focusing on the object of fear is more important than the psychic experience of fear itself because it says something about what the community holds sacred. This logic can be applied back to the three categories of fear I found on the MGTOW forum:

8 This is a reference to Elisabeth Kübler-Ross's five-stage model of mourning.

9 "Clown world" describes a society that is morally bankrupt, absurd, and irrational.

social ostracization, the family court, and emotional betrayal. Ahmed's theory reveals how MGTOW fears, though directed at women, suggest deeper anxieties about men losing their social status, economic resources, and emotional security. Irrespective of whether these fears pose a real risk to men, the association between the object and the fear is not created by fear itself but by the social imaginary of the community.

Ahmed (2004) further encourages scholars to question what fear *does*. MGTOW users coalesced around anecdotes of rage and fear, and the communal practices of storytelling and interpretation molded feelings into simplified shared narratives. We can understand this as "affective attunement": individual feelings are transformed into shared emotions, which strengthens the users' bond to the community (Papacharissi 2015). Individual stories of fear always followed the same formula of the male victim and the malevolent woman. Such stories have harmful consequences for gender relations because they reestablish a perceived distance between the genders (Ahmed 2004).

To further explain the origin of angry and fearful narratives in settings like r/MGTOW, Berry and Sobieraj (2014) describe a new genre of political opinion media they term "outrage media." Outrage media is characterized by venom, vilification of the enemy, and hyperbolic interpretations of current events. The outrage media creates an outrage discourse, which departs from typical media channels to reside in niche outrage venues such as r/MGTOW. Rather than political opponents, the enemies in this case were women. Berry and Sobieraj (2014, 8) liken outrage venues to churches: "the faithful attend, hear their values rearticulated in compelling ways, and leave feeling validated and virtuous for having participated."

The r/MGTOW forum, as an outrage venue, structured discussions and limited users' willingness to engage in conversations with opposing worldviews (Berry and Sobieraj 2014). During my ethnographic research, I saw how the more extreme posts that depict women as perpetrators and men as innocent victims were favored at the top of the "hot" and "popular" feeds. Massanari (2017) demonstrates how Reddit enables toxic subcultures to proliferate. Redditors can upvote or downvote material depending on how insightful they find it, and highly upvoted material appears on the subreddit's front page and therefore gets more attention from the users. The upvote "score" is displayed on the post and is translated into karma points for the original poster, which represent their contributions to Reddit. Although this system seems to suggest the site is democratic, in reality it incentivizes certain activities that might gain karma for the redditor (Massanari 2017). This system encourages and prioritizes sensationalist or extremist content, whereas alternative or oppositional posts may be downvoted or not voted at all and therefore absent from the "hot" and "popular" feeds. In effect, this prevented users of r/MGTOW from challenging or nuancing their misogynistic beliefs.

Research question 3 asked: *What kinds of emotions play a role in identity construction and relationship formation on r/MGTOW?* I discovered that rage and fear are communally rewritten and interpreted by MGTOW users to produce a mutually confirmed interpretation of the world. This strengthened their commitment to the MGTOW

ideology and established a (perceived) distance between the victims (men) and the perpetrators (women). We can understand the MGTOW forum as an outrage venue where attendees hear their values rearticulated through venomous and hateful rhetoric.

Conclusion

Manosphere groups like MGTOW, incels, and pick-up artists have been linked to numerous mass violence attacks against women and minorities (Zimmerman 2024). Studies suggest there is a concerning normalization of male supremacist ideologies in mainstream discourse (Solea and Sugiura 2023), which may explain why we see a growing gender divide among Generation Z. For instance, in the UK, young men increasingly see feminism as harmful, and one-fifth look favorably on far-right social media influencer Andrew Tate (Duffy, Campbell, and Skinner 2024).

Previously, scholars (e.g., Rothermel 2023; Jane 2018; Gotell and Dutton 2016) critically analyzed the nature and logic of hatred and misogyny circulated in heterogeneous manosphere groups, and others (Moskalenko et al. 2022; Habib, Srinivasan, and Nithyanand 2022) mapped the radicalization and terrorist potential of engaging in such groups. This study brings a new perspective to the manosphere discussion by focusing on the *positive* emotional bonds between forum members. This relational approach to understanding male supremacist communities will help future researchers understand the growing attractiveness of such extremist ideologies, the factors that make men want to stay, and the complexity of issues and feelings that these groups try to deal with.

This article stresses how the “gray man” lifestyle and philosophy is extremely appealing to young and old men who are dissatisfied with the traditional male social roles they feel restricted to. Emotion was a central force behind the r/MGTOW community, where users communally interpreted their feelings and identities to fit complex feelings into the preexisting, misogynistic, and essentialist gender ideology of MGTOW. Giving advice and emotional alignment fostered a sense of belonging in the r/MGTOW community, which highlights a need to examine how emotional support within other extremist digital spaces—such as white supremacist websites and forums—entice newcomers and present harmful ideologies as a simple and logical explanation for complex feelings of displacement, isolation, and frustration. Moreover, the technological qualities of the host platform must be given more attention; as shown in this article, there are specific technological qualities of Reddit that allow extremist content to dominate forum discussions.

Ultimately, analyzing the manosphere is incomplete without a broader look at how systemic conditions facilitate the formulation of niche male supremacist ideologies. Although MGTOW members position themselves as outsiders, they remain embedded within patriarchal structures and shifting gender norms. MGTOW’s adoption of a marginalized identity conceals such enduring structures of power, and users frame their experiences as gynocentric oppression rather than by critiquing a system that

discourages men from establishing meaningful and supportive relationships with one another.

Further research could investigate the rhetorical and linguistic techniques used in rationalizing different manosphere ideologies and belief systems, as well as the role of platforms in reinforcing and amplifying such extremist views. It is important to further investigate how misogynistic beliefs and worldviews are justified and maintained, both within private manosphere communities and across public social media platforms. The technological qualities of sites—such as algorithms and moderation practices, together with the profit-driven ideologies that underpin them, like attention economies that prioritize views, clicks, and profits—play a crucial role in the spread of toxic ideologies. Further examination into these would illustrate how and why men become further entrenched in hateful groups and could therefore offer practical guidance to counter digital hate and the mainstreaming of misogyny.

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ARTICLE

The Pornography of Fools

Tracing the History of Sexual Antisemitism

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Abstract: *This article is an attempt to provide a genealogy of the sexual emotions and desires at work in contemporary far-right antisemitism. Embedded in primary research while also drawing heavily on the existing literature on antisemitism, the article seeks to make an intervention into the historiography of antisemitism and to argue for the existence of a sexual component at the heart of antisemitism, both historically and today. The article starts by briefly discussing a very short and specific story from Irish Jewish history in the 1900s, and then moves to a seemingly very unconnected story about the vocabulary of twenty-first-century American politics. And then what follows—a discussion of how these two stories are essentially intertwined and a broad overview of the history of antisemitism—argues for sexual antisemitism as a key concept for understanding anti-Jewish ideologies.*

Keywords: antisemitism, sexuality studies, pornography, alt-right, racism, white nationalism, anti-Judaism

This article is an attempt to provide a deep historical genealogy of the sexual emotions and desires at work in contemporary far-right antisemitism. Embedded in primary research while also drawing heavily on the existing literature on antisemitism, this article seeks to intervene in the historiography of antisemitism and to argue for the existence of a sexual component at the heart of antisemitism, both historically and today. My central, counterintuitive claim is that while serious scholars of antisemitism recognize its abhorrent nature, for antisemites it is instead something positive. The organizing principle is the need to identify the joy that exponents of various forms of racism gain from their actions and, as this article specifically argues, the various kinds of erotic excitement that antisemites might gain from anti-Jewish hatred.

Methodologically, the article is consciously speculative in its approach: it is highly difficult, if not impossible, to know the “true” motivations for anyone, least of all people on the fringes of mainstream politics. As Susannah Heschel has recently stated, “Motivations may not be verbal, and they often elude the most careful empiricist historian.” For Heschel, the solution is to focus on the emotional aspects of antisemitism,

even with the recognition that “emotions” are elusive things.¹ A key supposition of my approach is that if recurring patterns and themes are clearly visible across different pieces of antisemitic archival material, then those themes and patterns almost certainly point to recurring concerns—whether political, social, religious, or otherwise—of the antisemites who authored them. More specifically, the recurring use of sexually explicit material can be legitimately read as saying something about the sexual desires and sexual excitement that animate antisemites. The interpretations engaged in here are certainly not the only possible ones, but as will be argued, interpretations grounded in sexuality studies have the potential to make an important contribution to how we understand antisemitism.

Additionally, this work strives to remain fully cognizant of the simultaneous continuity and discontinuity that always characterizes antisemitism across its *longue durée*. Sexual themes, up to and including what appears to be an invitation to gain sexual titillation and enjoyment from the hatred of Jews, is a long-repeating pattern from medieval religious anti-Judaism to modern racial antisemitism (and in some ways going back to antiquity), even as the specific social, economic, and political contexts in which that hatred was activated changed constantly. Heschel has argued for an “erotohistoriography” of antisemitism, one that is alert to *both* the microhistory of antisemitism *as well as* the macrohistorical ways in which certain tropes or claims about Jews recur across vastly different times and places. This “erotohistoriography,” as the term suggests, is also able to see how antisemitism plays on the emotional, the intimate, the personal, and the sexual, all in ways that are comparable to other forms of racism.² Focusing on the “erotics of race,” she notes, will allow us to understand both the “pleasure” and “excitement” experienced during acts of racist denigration as well as the connections between the deeper gratifications being offered and the tenacity of racism over the centuries. The various goals and underlying assumptions of this article overlap neatly with the salient points Heschel makes.

The article starts by discussing a short and specific story from Irish Jewish history in the 1900s, and then moves to a seemingly unconnected story about the vocabulary of twenty-first-century American politics. The rest of what follows—a discussion of how these two stories are essentially intertwined and a broad overview of the history of antisemitism—argues for *sexual antisemitism* as a key concept for understanding anti-Jewish ideologies.

1 Susannah Heschel, “Likrat Historiografiah Erotit: Chaker Ha-Memadim Ha-Choshim ve-Ha-Regashim shel ha-antishemiot” [Toward an erotic historiography: Exploring the sensory and emotional dimensions of antisemitism], *Tziyon* [Zion] 85, nos. 1–4 (2020): 73–95, at 77. My thanks to Professor Heschel for sharing this research with me.

2 Heschel; see also, Sharon Patricia Hollan, *The Erotic Life of Racism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), which informs Heschel’s work.

Stealthy Visits in the Darkness

The first story: In January 1904, a Catholic priest named John Creagh began a campaign of intimidation against the small Jewish community in Limerick, a provincial city on the west coast of Ireland. Using his religious pulpit, Creagh was able to foment a program of economic boycotts against Jewish merchants in the city. Some acts of nonlethal violence against the Limerick Jewish community also took place, and by the summer of the following year the Jewish community in the city had decreased by half. Collectively, these events have become known as the Limerick Boycott, usually seen as the most extreme moment of antisemitism in modern Irish history—extreme by the relatively quiet standards of Irish Jewish history, less so from the broader perspective of twentieth-century Europe. Creagh had been initially encouraged in his actions by local native-born traders, who resented the economic competition of newly arrived Jewish grocers. And Creagh’s sermons drew on the standard tropes and accusations of pre-Vatican II Catholic anti-Judaism, mixing long-standing accusations of deicide with more recent accusations connected to the Dreyfus Affair in France a decade earlier. Analyses of these events generally echo this, explaining the root causes of the Limerick Boycott either in terms of economic competition or religious bigotry.³ Indeed, more broadly, these are two of the most common modes of historiographical analysis of antisemitism: antisemitism as a kind of misfired class consciousness—what the German Marxist August Bebel is apocryphally said to have called “the socialism of fools”—or antisemitism as the result of a recurring Christian anger about “Christ killers” who have refused to accept the (supposed) messianic truth of Jesus.

This article, however, investigates a different strand, one that I believe recurs regularly across the history of antisemitism and exists in combination with religious and political-economic factors. In the first of his violent sermons, John Creagh aimed his wrath at Jewish usurers (a conventional target of antisemites) but then added a charged and potentially very sexualized twist, claiming that rural housewives were the most common targets of Jews selling goods on credit in the agricultural hinterland of Limerick.

The Jew has got a sweet tongue when he wishes—he passes off his miserable goods upon her. She has to spare and stint to get the money to pay off the Jew without her husband knowing it, and then follow misery, sorrow and deceit. The wife is afraid lest her husband should find out that she has been dealing with the Jews. . . . The wife . . . will beg the Jew not to come to her

3 On the history of Irish antisemitism, see Dermot Keogh, *Jews in Twentieth-Century Ireland: Refugees, Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust* (Cork: Cork University Press, 1998). See also Natalie Wynn, “Irish Representations of Jews and Jewish Responses / Jewish Representations of Jews and Irish Responses”; Peter Hession, “New Jerusalem’: Constructing Jewish Space in Ireland, 1880–1914”; and R. M. Douglas, “Not So Different After All’: Irish and Continental Antisemitism in Comparative Perspective,” all in *Irish Questions and Jewish Questions: Crossovers in Culture*, ed. Aidan Beatty and Dan O’Brien (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2018).

house—she does not want him to be seen coming, and then stealthy visits must be paid at night, in the darkness, lest the dealings might be found out.⁴

Creagh went on to claim that if his parishioners visit the home of one particular Jewish trader they “will be surprised to see the number and class of people who are going in and out . . . to pay the Jew his usury.” In barely concealed terms, Creagh appeared to make a very specific accusation about the dangers of (implicitly male) Jews. The language used—“stealthy visits . . . in the darkness”—seems designed to simultaneously prick the masculine pride of his audience while also offering up a small hint of sexual titillation. Father Creagh’s charged accusation, then, seems to be that Irish men are being unknowingly cuckolded by Jews who have trapped their wives into giving them sexual favors.⁵

Cuckolds and Cuckservatives

The second story is about this word “cuckold.” Deriving from Old French and etymologically related to the word “cuckoo,” cuckold is a generally pejorative term; just as a cuckoo unnaturally lays her eggs in another bird’s nest, so also a cuckold is an unnatural man who allows another man to enter his home and have sex with his wife. It entered the English language probably around the mid-thirteenth century, becoming a more obscure term by the twentieth. But what I am particularly interested in is the curious way it recently reentered American vernacular English. Sometime around 2015, the term “cuckservative” began to be used in online far-right circles to describe conservative politicians that are supposedly too moderate or too willing to compromise with liberals. It has since been shortened to the succinct and aggressive sounding “cuck,” and is regularly used as a noun, a verb, or an adjective.⁶ It is a fluid word that can be deployed in divergent ways even if the central accusation it connotes is always of docile and unmanly submissiveness. For instance, Mitt Romney is a *cuck* because his alleged receptiveness to working with Democrats marks him as a weak, effeminate pseudoconservative, but also Mitt Romney has been *cucked* by Donald Trump, and

4 *Munster News*, January 13, 1904, reprinted in Dermot Keogh and Andrew McCarthy, eds., *The Limerick Boycott: Antisemitism in Ireland* (Cork: Mercier Press, 2005), 35–36. For other contemporary reporting on Creagh and the boycott, see *Limerick Echo*, January 19, 1904; “Jews in Ireland,” *Dundalk Democrat*, January 30, 1904; “Jews in Limerick,” *Kerry Evening Post*, January 13, 1904; “On Jewish Methods,” *Evening Herald*, January 13, 1904; and “The Jews in Limerick,” *The Freeman’s Journal*, January 23, 1904. I am grateful to Trisha Kessler and Seán Gannon for sharing their own research in this area with me.

5 This was certainly not a new type of allegation: an accusation in 1321 in France held that “Jews had sex with the wives of their Christian debtors and committed other horrible crimes, all of which merited their expulsion.” David Nirenberg, *Communities of Violence: Persecution of Minorities in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1996), 53.

6 David Weigel, “Cuckservative’: The Conservative Insult of the Month Explained,” *Washington Post*, July 29, 2015, www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/07/29/cuckservative-the-conservative-insult-of-the-month-explained/.

anyone who does not support Trump's agenda is a *cuck* liberal.⁷ It is a word bound up with both sexual desire and humiliation: Romney is a pathetic cuck, but Trump's appeal partly lies in his ability to cuck others. And while it is a word that has begun to circulate far beyond its original far-right base, it still betrays those origins; it is part of broader far-right obsessions surrounding sex, power, control, and Jews. For example, the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, increasingly popular in far-right circles, claims that Jews are orchestrating a flood of nonwhite immigrants who will outreproduce whites, mate with white women, or otherwise manipulate white birth rates; in one sense, it is a claim that Jews are cucking white men and taking their rightful sexual power away from them.

Cuckservative as a term is a borrowing from a specific genre of pornography. In her brilliantly provocative book *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men*, Jane Ward provides a useful summation of the standard plot of this cuckolding pornographic genre: “[A] straight (and typically white) man discovers that his wife or girlfriend is cheating on him with a stronger, sexually powerful (and typically Black) male rival. Feeling emasculated and undeserving of his female partner, the (white) man watches her have sex with his rival and is told he must submit to both of them in order to keep his wife.”⁸ As a genre, it combines sexual titillation and gratification (features of all genres of pornography) with humiliation and longstanding racist assumptions about hypervirulent Black male sexuality. The so-called alt-right—an uneasy mix of white nationalists, libertarians, and trolls—is predominantly a phenomenon of the internet and it shares that online existence with this kind of pornography (and in repurposing the word “cuckold,” it reflects the popularity of this pornography). Like the alt-right, this genre of pornography displays a fascination with the cuckolding of white husbands by Black men, and it thus operates at the intersections of racism and sexual fantasy. As Andrea Long Chu writes, “The trope of the black man’s penis as large, threatening, and tremendously potent is an old one, of course, the standby excuse for lynchings and white supremacist terror, and it’s found all across the pornographic spectrum.” This is not least the case in cuckolding porn, “in which white boyfriends and husbands are forced to watch, and occasionally participate,” as Black men have sex with their eager wives and girlfriends. “The classic explanation for this fetish,” Chu says, is Frantz Fanon’s “theory of negrophobia as a kind of murderous envy: the white man, projecting onto the black man the ‘infinite virility’ he worries he lacks.”

The paradox of white supremacy, of course, is that it’s actually an inferiority complex: the white man, who could have just as easily fantasized that the

7 These various uses of “cuck” can be found in the following tweets: Dash Cool (@ZenGod55), Twitter, August 18, 2017, 10:47 a.m., <https://x.com/Zengod55/status/898556844909543426>; Kyle Kulinski (@KyleKulinski), Twitter, February 25, 2018, 3:32 p.m., <https://x.com/KyleKulinski/status/967859901308522501>; and Tito (@Slick15Rk), Twitter, September 5, 2020, 5:12 p.m., <https://x.com/Slick15Rk/status/1302353964604813317>.

8 Jane Ward, *Not Gay: Sex between Straight White Men* (New York: NYU Press, 2015), 102.

black man's penis was smaller than his own—it would be fantasy either way, after all—nevertheless opts to imagine himself as a sexual failure, going limp in the presence of the black man's unlimited sexual potency.⁹

Seeing this genre of pornography in these terms fits closely with what Julian Carter has identified as the paradoxical ways whiteness is constructed with and through images of recurrent weakness.¹⁰ Those online white nationalists and antisemites who deploy these accusations of being a “cuck” seem to be repulsed by interracial sex even as they reference it—presumably willingly—again and again. Like the husbands in these standard plots, it is as if they cannot look away from actions that both humiliate and arouse them.

Slavoj Žižek commented in *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema* that pornography is an inherently conservative genre because of the way it always seeks to flatter its audience's fantasies, never to confound them or supersede them or push them in new directions.¹¹ Highly racialized cuckolding pornography is more than just conservative, though; it is inherently reactionary, not only employing racist tropes but also helping to reproduce them online. That pornography would be so openly racist is hardly surprising since racism and bigotry are themselves often noticeably pornographic.

Toward a Theory of Sexual Antisemitism

Sexual racism is probably as old as colonialism itself. In Ireland, “England's first colony,”¹² the Welsh Norman ideologue Giraldus Cambrensis (1146–1223) implied that “the Irish will have sex with any available partner, without any taboo, restriction or social rule whatsoever. This is behavior that truly marks them as bestial, beneath the standards of humanity: they copulate as freely as animals.”¹³ While the claims about different races made across the material discussed below have certain exclusive attributes, all of these are, in one way or another, sexual fantasies operating through racism and racial fantasies operating through sexualized imagery.

Antiblack racism has a long history of relying on stereotypes about Black male sexual potency, lust, and rapaciousness. Concurrent with the short-lived enfranchisement of Black men during Reconstruction, the “titillating and violence-provoking theory of the super-potency of [the] black superpenis,” which had been “whispered about for

9 Andrea Long Chu, *Females* (London: Verso, 2019), 82–83.

10 Julian B. Carter, *The Heart of Whiteness: Normal Sexuality and Race in America, 1880–1940* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 72.

11 *The Pervert's Guide to Cinema*, directed by Sophie Fiennes (Mischief Films / Amoeba Film, 2006), documentary, 150 minutes.

12 Friedrich Engels to Karl Marx, May 23, 1856, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Ireland and the Irish Question*, ed. I. L. Golman and V. E. Kunina (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1971), 83.

13 Joep Leerssen, *National Thought in Europe: A Cultural History* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2006), 31.

several centuries,” became something of a social obsession in the South.¹⁴ Stories about Black male lust for white women, often the pretexts for lynchings, played on these highly sexualized tales. Claims of Black male “super-sexual predators” also fueled antiblack violence in twentieth-century Britain.¹⁵ In similar fashion, Black women were (and are) regularly depicted, in the white supremacist imagination, as either having freakishly weird and hyperfeminine bodies, or as objectified receptacles for white male sexual attention, as Dorothy Roberts discussed in *Killing the Black Body*.¹⁶ In his recent monumental work on racial violence in the United States, Walter Johnson discusses “all the torture and violation by which white people have historically drawn pleasure from the suffering of Blacks.” Johnson then goes on to speak of white men’s “anxiety that white women might have unfulfilled sexual desires and that those desires might lead them into the arms of darker men.” But he also notes the ways such an archetypal white man can transform “his anxieties into optimism, his fears of sexual inadequacy into a sensation of erotic potency,” fueling “the sexual energy that these white men felt as they murdered a Black man whose projected animal appetites they openly condemned and secretly desired.” Johnson summarizes this as “the circular expression of inadequacy, entitlement, privilege, and violence we might call imperial whiteness.”¹⁷ The parallels here between pornography and racism are readily apparent, showing the complicated ways pleasure and racial hatred exist simultaneously.

The history of what Anne McClintock has called “porno-tropics”¹⁸—sexualized fantasies of racial outsiders—is long and varied. Writing on the history of antisemitism has tended to be siloed within Jewish studies, rarely cross-pollinating with postcolonial theory or the historiography of American racism (and the latter two rarely engage with Jewish studies).¹⁹ Yet, sexual antisemitism can be placed into these broader histories even as it diverges in key ways from racialized pornography that displays a prominent white male anxiety about

14 Jane Dailey, *White Fright: The Sexual Panic at the Heart of America’s Racist History* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 6. Dailey is here citing Eugene Genovese.

15 Gavin Schaffer, “Perverts and Purists: The Idea of Jewish Sexual Difference in Britain, 1900–1945,” in *Jews and Sex*, ed. Nathan Abrams (Nottingham: Five Leaves Publications, 2008), 102.

16 Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction and the Meaning of Liberty* (New York: Vintage, 1998).

17 Walter Johnson, *The Broken Heart of America: St. Louis and the Violent History of the United States* (New York: Basic Books, 2020), 8, 186, 188, 189. For a discussion of social boundaries, minorities’ perceived impotence, and the ways their resistance against that impotence become classified as pollution or sexual violation, see R. I. Moore, *The Formation of a Persecuting Society: Authority and Deviance in Western Europe, 950–1250*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 95.

18 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 22.

19 Heschel, “Likrat,” 78; Bryan Cheyette, “White Skins, Black Masks: Jews and Jewishness in the Writings of George Eliot and Frantz Fanon,” in *Cultural Readings of Imperialism: Edward Said and the Gravity of History*, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, Benita Parry, and Judith Squires (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 74–99.

white women and their alleged desires for Black men. The antisemitic material studied below often had a somewhat similar content, focusing on sexual contact between Jewish men and white/Gentile women, but with none of the same anxieties about white women's sexual agency. Additionally, even as Jewish men are often depicted as sexually dangerous, there is none of the clear inferiority complex that Walter Johnson or Julian Carter identified. White supremacists may desire a sexual potency they project onto Black men; they do not seem to desire Jewish sexualities.

When I talk about racism and pornography, I am also thinking of the ways Orientalist art in the nineteenth century depicted a vaguely defined East as a luxurious space of sexual license, whether a heterosexual license or a homosexual one.²⁰ Already in the twelfth century, Islam was being conflated with pederasty in Western political discourse.²¹ Orientalism and antisemitism have a very close history, not least in the ways nineteenth-century Jewish women were simultaneously sexualized and Orientalized—the Jewess was supposedly “recognised by her stylised sensual beauty: her large dark eyes, abundant hair and languid expression”²²—or the manner in which contemporary white slave narratives combined antisemitic claims about “foreign” Jewish men dealing in flesh with Orientalist fantasies of beautiful and submissive white female captives in Eastern harems. Such women were depicted as lacking all agency and thus existing as pure objects for male sexual subjects. In Victorian-era white slave narratives, the male enslavers were often coded as Jewish, or vaguely racially “Other,” with their depictions being legible in two diverging ways. First, and most obviously, these sexually dangerous men were figures of abhorrence who violated normative social rules. But were they not also, even if only implicitly, sexually exciting figures who enjoyed easy access to submissive white female flesh? As one scholar has said, “Visions of the harem, and ideas of white women forced therein to engage in sexual adventures with darker-skinned men, fascinated Europeans in the colonial period.”²³ Fascinated *and aroused*, I would add. What often characterizes sexual racism is an envious politics of resentment combining with a violent grievance; *we* could never get away with this, but *they* can. In

20 Joseph Massad, *Desiring Arabs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007). What Orlando Figes observes of Russian Orientalist literature in the nineteenth century repeats itself in several different national contexts: the Orient was imagined as “a hedonistic kingdom of sensual luxury and indolence, seraglios and sultans, as everything in fact, that the austere north [or west] was not.” See his *Natasha's Dance: A Cultural History of Russia* (New York: Picador, 2002), 384. The “East” is the place where you can break all the sexual rules enforced in the “West.”

21 Moore, *Formation*, 88.

22 Nadia Valman, *The Jewess in Nineteenth-Century British Literature* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 4. It is telling that there is no Jewish male equivalent here; the stereotypical Jewish male figure is not presented as a sexually attractive figure.

23 Mir Yarfitz, *Impure Migration: Jews and Sex Work in Golden Age Argentina* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 22, 25. The 1935 antisemitic screed *America's Ju-Deal* claimed it would “expose” the central role of Jews in the “White Slave Traffic.” “America's Ju-Deal” (Community Press), Promotional Pamphlet (n.d.), AJA MS 307 Bertha V. Corets Papers, Box 3, Folder 2.

making this claim, it often seems that sexual racists are perhaps laying bare a recurring conceit of their own erotic desires: *we wish* we could get away with *that*.²⁴

Many years ago, in his famous essay “The Paranoid Style in American Politics,” Richard Hofstadter made the astute observation that “anti-Catholicism has always been the pornography of the Puritan.”²⁵ Anti-Catholic screeds, such as the notorious 1836 hoax *The Awful Disclosures of Maria Monk*, played on the notion that Catholic priests were sexually depraved and that nuns were helpless victims with no agency. But also, by describing their sexual actions in extreme detail, these tales provided a forum for sexual titillation.²⁶ The central argument I aim to pursue here is that antisemitism (particularly antisemitic visual material) often operates according to a similar, if not always fully identical, rationale, welding horror and arousal at one and the same time. Or to put it differently, scholars of antisemitism often overlook a key but uncomfortable truth: for antisemites, antisemitic culture is a pleasant thing to experience. It is perhaps even designed to be titillating and erotically gratifying. The story that Creagh told his parishioners is open to multiple readings. Not least, for my purposes, is that his accusations also functioned on an erotic level. Alongside Catholic anti-Judaism and economic antisemitism, Creagh was engaging in sexual fantasies about Jewish men cuckolding Irish Catholic husbands.

Indeed, this kind of sexual imagery and titillation recurs again and again in the history of antisemitism, often with recourse to something akin to the rhetorical device of *occupatio*, in which a speaker claims to be ignoring the very thing they then focus on. What I aim to do for the rest of this article is argue for the existence of a specific strand of *sexual antisemitism*, one that has been noticed by many historians but not yet fully theorized or conceptualized. Pornography is inherently sexual by design. The material studied below in some cases also seems to be intentionally erotic in form and content; in other cases, it seems to be sexual because that is one of the ingrained patterns of antisemitic cultural production.

24 Gargi Bhattacharyya et al. have made a similar point regarding a contemporary panic on the British right about so-called “Pakistani grooming gangs”: “[C]hild sexual exploitation has been blamed on ‘Pakistani grooming gangs,’ which have become the most visceral marker of anti-Muslim sentiment in British politics. . . . [T]his concern about ‘grooming gangs’ reveals a wider set of crises and contestations over gender, sexuality and culture. The ‘Pakistani grooming gang’ has been mobilised as a unique and existential threat to white girls, rehashing familiar fears of miscegenation, paedophilia and the civilizationist rhetoric of the ‘War on Terror.’ . . . These collective threats to the nation are imagined to play by their own, different, rules, and therefore to be acculturated within some other moral order and system of authority, embedded in an alternative and unknowable form of social organisation—both dangerous and seductive.” See *Empire’s Endgame: Racism and the British State* (London: Pluto Press, 2021), 48–49.

25 Richard Hofstadter, “The Paranoid Style in American Politics” (1964), in *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage, 2012), 21.

26 Similarly hypersexualized claims circulated in the nineteenth century about Mormons, often featuring an “obsessive concern about plural marriage.” Michael Barkun, *A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2013), 134; Mary Campbell, *Charles Ellis Johnson and the Erotic Mormon Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 31.

Antisemitism and “Jewish” Sexual Danger

Ancient and medieval anti-Judaism were often disarmingly sexual in content, claiming that Jews were prone to extremes of lust. As early as the second century, the Roman historian Tacitus was mixing the standard accusation that Jews are particularist and self-serving with erotic claims: “The Jews are extremely loyal toward one another and always ready to show compassion, but toward every other people they feel only hate and enmity . . . and although as a race they are prone to lust, they abstain from intercourse with foreign women; yet among themselves nothing is unlawful.”²⁷ In other words, Jews were defined as much by their lustful and taboo-defying sexualities as by their alleged clannishness. Claims of excessive Jewish lust and overfocus on the material and the bodily in time came to reinforce Christians’ contrasting self-image of ascetic, supracorporeal spirituality and were common currency in the ancient Mediterranean.²⁸ “Synagoga,” the female personification of Jewry and the opposite of “Ecclesia,” herself underwent an important shift in the move from late antiquity into the medieval period. From being a “a pitiful remnant of Divine history,” Synagoga instead became a “common whore, led astray by her lustful nature.” She was conventionally depicted holding a decapitated ram’s head by its horns. As well as referencing the ram sacrificed by Abraham on Mount Moriah in Genesis 22, this symbolized Jews’ animalistic sexuality and carnality. “The oversexed ram of Judaism” was now contrasted by “the docile lamb of Christianity.”²⁹ Henry Abramson has assembled a list of shockingly sexualized images of Jews from the Middle Ages to the early modern era, such as a “sixteenth-century representation of a horrific demon, identified as Jewish with the coin-shaped *rouelle* on his [*sic*] clothing,” who is depicted with “both a menacingly erect penis as well as a heavily nipples pair of drooping breasts.” Next to him/her/it is a second demon, also depicted with both breasts and “a dagger-like penis”; this gender-bending Jewish demon is “incongruously playing the bagpipe atop a vomiting pig.”³⁰ Joshua Trachtenberg, in his famous 1943 work *The Devil and the Jews*, observed that the shockingly sexual *Judensau* (Jew-pig) images, popular in German lands in the Middle Ages, often featured the Devil supervising the action. Another popular Jewish caricature depicted Jews riding backwards on goats as a symbol of their general

27 Tacitus, *The Histories*, trans. Clifford H. Moore (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1931), 180–83.

28 David Biale, *Eros and the Jews: From Biblical Israel to Contemporary America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 11; Josh Lambert, *Unclean Lips: Obscenity, Jews, and American Culture* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 3; Todd Berzon, *Classifying Christians: Ethnography, Heresiology, and the Limits of Knowledge in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 35–36; Alexandra Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust in Medieval Religious Polemic* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 200, 231–32.

29 Henry Abramson, “A Ready Hatred: Depictions of Jewish Women in Medieval Antisemitic Art and Caricature,” *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 62 (1996): 11–12.

30 Abramson, 4.

unnaturalness. As Trachtenberg points out, “The *Bock* or billy goat, as the Middle Ages knew full well, is the devil’s favorite animal, frequently represented as symbolic of satanic lechery.”³¹ The Benedictine historian Guibert of Nogent (ca. 1055–1124) argued, in a soon-to-be-popular formulation, “that there was a special link between the Devil and the Jews, sexually bonded and characterized by the seduction of Christians into the Devil’s service by means of Jewish wiles.” Jewish pollution and perfidy, as well as their “exceptional sexual voracity and endowment,” were key ingredients of this propaganda.³² Sex resides at or just below the surface here. And Trachtenberg has quite rightly spoken of how antisemitic tales and folk imagery functioned as both sources of entertainment and instruction. Jews in these representations were comic as well as vile characters.³³ Eli Bromberg has even gone so far as to suggest that medieval blood libels can also be read as thinly veiled accusations of Jewish pedophilia.³⁴ There does seem to be a resonance between how pedophiles and “groomers” are imagined today and the thirteenth-century Dominican preacher Giordano da Pisa’s description of alleged Jewish crimes: “He reported that Jews abducted poor Christian boys, promised them money, and circumcised them.”³⁵ And certain passages in the Talmud that can be misinterpreted as condoning pedophilia have been seized upon in recent years by the online far right, a connection that Bromberg also draws in tracing the prehistory of the QAnon and Pizzagate conspiracy theories—built on lurid claims about the sexual abuse of children—back to their medieval forebears.³⁶ It is certainly the case that Jews

31 Joshua Trachtenberg, *The Devil and the Jews: The Medieval Conception of the Jew and Its Relation to Modern Antisemitism* (1943; repr., Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1983), 26. Jewish sexual depravity was a central theme in *Judensau* images, which regularly depicted Jews examining the genitalia of pigs or licking their anuses.

32 Moore, *Formation*, 60. Claims of Jewish sexual endowment are almost nonexistent in the more recent history of antisemitism; this feature of medieval anti-Judaism did not survive into modernity.

33 Trachtenberg, *Devil and the Jews*, 13–14.

34 Eli Bromberg, *Unsettling: Jews, Whiteness, and Incest in American Popular Culture* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2021), 4. Henry Abramson makes the same point: “Pedophilia, particularly involving young boys, is a recurrent charge in the antisemitic repertoire, consistent with the notion of oversexed Jewish men handicapped by weak, womanly physiques.” “Ready Hatred,” 4. See also the caricature in the May 1934 issue of *Der Stürmer* that depicts Jewish men directly sucking blood from the nude corpse of a (presumably Christian) child of indeterminate gender. The caricature, not least the long, quasi-phallic straws, has obvious sexual connotations. American Jewish Archives (AJA), Nearprint Special Topics—Antisemitism, Box 2, 1934 Folder. This was a special issue on the *Jüdischer Mordplan* (Jewish murder plan), reprinted as a souvenir edition by the US National State’s Rights Party sometime after 1958. See *Jewish Ritual Murder*, undated handbill (ca. 1960s/70s), Johns Hopkins University Special Collections (JHU), White Supremacist Ephemera 1937–2007 (Folder 1 of 3), which also claims a connection between a supposed Jewish desire to kill and “perverted sex practices.”

35 Paola Tartakoff, *Conversion, Circumcision, and Ritual Murder in Medieval Europe* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020), 32.

36 Talia Lavin, *Culture Warlords: My Journey into the Dark Web of White Supremacy* (New York: Hachette, 2020), 41–42; Bromberg, *Unsettling*, 7. For earlier uses of Talmudic accusations by the American far right, see “The Talmud Unmasked,” Christian Patriots Crusade Handbill, n.d., AJA, MS 0290, Box 3, Folder

were perceived as a source of sexual danger in medieval Christendom. This was probably a metaphorical danger, a way of condemning apostasy and warning of the dangers of conversion, since such conversions were exceedingly rare.

Explicit discussions of Jewish circumcision were certainly not uncommon in this kind of cultural production,³⁷ and Alexandra Cuffel has shown how popular conceptions of Jewish perfidy were regularly conveyed through images of filth, animality, and somatic disgust.³⁸ Building on Cuffel's work, my argument is that these kinds of claims were not just intended to disgust their audience but in some cases to titillate them with images of the sexually weird and the freakish. My presumption is that they were received as pleasing tales as well as being pieces of vernacular religious instruction.

Whether, how much, and in what ways modern antisemitism lies in a straight continuity with medieval anti-Judaism is a vexed question.³⁹ David Nirenberg's view, that anti-Judaism is a flexible system of thought in which recurring claims can be put to work in vastly different social and political contexts from antiquity to modernity, seems like the best workable answer since it allows us to grapple with both the continuities and discontinuities of anti-Jewish hatred's long history.⁴⁰ As Heschel has noted, "antisemitism" as a macrohistorical concept does important intellectual work, illuminating the "chains of tradition" that link different microhistorical moments of hatred.⁴¹ And even if we should not draw a simple straight line from medieval religious anti-Judaism to modern racial or

5; "Facts are Facts," Christian Educational Association Pamphlet, 1954, AJA, MS 0290, Box 6, Folder 4; "Who Are the Real Hate-Mongers," *National Renaissance Bulletin* 10, no.1 (January 1959) AJA, MS 0290, Box 10, Folder 7.

37 Leonard B. Glick, *Marked in Your Flesh: Circumcision from Ancient Judea to Modern America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 101; Tartakoff, *Conversion*. This graphicness certainly did not end with the Middle Ages. One mid-eighteenth-century British pamphlet—*The Christian's New Warning Piece: Or, A Full and True Account of the Circumcision of Sir E. T. Bart* (London: W. Owen, 1753)—features a satirical, and gruesome, depiction of a pro-Jewish politician who had agreed to be circumcised in exchange for Jewish financial support, only to have his foreskin stolen and the offer of funds withdrawn. See also the two early twentieth-century postcards, from Algeria and Tunisia, which graphically depict a "humorous" circumcision scene, complete with oversized scissors and a terrified baby urinating into the mouth of a grinning mohel. Salo Aizenberg, *Hatemail: Anti-Semitism on Picture Postcards* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), 82.

38 Cuffel, *Gendering Disgust*, 7ff.

39 Maurice Samuels, "Literature and the Study of Anti-Semitism," *American Historical Review* 123, no.4 (2018): 1223–33; David Nirenberg, "Was There Race before Modernity? The Example of 'Jewish' Blood in Late Medieval Spain," in *Neighboring Faiths: Christianity, Islam, and Judaism in the Middle Ages and Today* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014), 169–90; Jacob Katz, *From Prejudice to Destruction: Anti-Semitism, 1700–1933* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980). For an overview of the difficulties of creating a workable definition and chronology of antisemitism, see Steven Beller, *Antisemitism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 1–10.

40 David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2013), 1–12.

41 Heschel, "Likrat," 75.

pseudoscientific antisemitism, it is still the case that while there was a discontinuity in function, there was a specific kind of continuity in content here, one that cuts across the divide between the Middle Ages and modernity.⁴² Most importantly for my purposes, medieval anti-Jewish culture provided a thick seed bed for modern antisemitism. Medieval anti-Jewish animus was already markedly sexual; I am agnostic as to whether it can be called pornography in any conventional sense, but it was clearly smuggling sexualized content, mixing theology with titillation.

Moving very rapidly (perhaps too rapidly) into modernity, we find that depictions of Jews in the Nazi *Der Stürmer* shared a graphicness with their medieval antecedents. And they certainly tend to fit the description of pornography better:

[I]t is readily apparent that in its narrative pacing, its luxuriantly detailed descriptions of sex crimes, and its many pictures of naked blondes defiled by big-nosed Jews, *Der Stürmer* served as pornography. While it is impossible to know with which characters in *Der Stürmer*'s scenarios readers identified (was it the sexually successful Jewish man, the violated or seduced non-Jewish woman, the outraged non-Jewish male or female voyeur?), the multiplicity of possibilities for libidinal identification may have been precisely the point and could help to explain the paper's immense appeal, especially for teenage boys.⁴³

Many of the caricatures appearing in *Der Stürmer* already in the Weimar period sought to play directly on accusations (and perhaps also to arouse sexual jealousies) that Jewish men were gaining undue sexual access to Aryan German women. At times this seemed to encode a certain kind of economic grievance, claiming Jewish men had a wealth that gave them a life of free sexual access or sexual ease, all supposedly denied to German Gentile men. Against the metaphorical sexual contact of the Middle Ages, these cartoons were produced in a society where actual intermarriage was now a real possibility and where Nazi obsessions with racial purity were finding increasing popular purchase. But other caricatures in *Der Stürmer* presented Jews as rapacious threats to German Aryan womanhood (figure 1), though often with a graphic nudity and explicitness that to me suggest the purpose slipped into the pornographic. Claims that Jewish men posed a specific threat to the sexual purity of Aryan womanhood were rife among Nazis; the entry on *Mädchenhandel* (white slavery, literally "girl trafficking") in the Nazis' 1931 antisemitic encyclopedia ran to about fifty pages.⁴⁴ Anxieties about capitalism and the fear

42 On the ways that modern antisemitism had roots in medieval anti-Judaism (and the manner in which the borders between the two are regularly quite fuzzy), see Heschel, "Likrat," 79.

43 Dagmar Herzog, *Sex after Fascism: Memory and Morality in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), 37–40. See also Heschel, "Likrat," 90.

44 Edward Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice: The Jewish Fight against White Slavery, 1870–1939* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), 304.

that, under capitalism, “all that is holy is profaned,” can be interpreted here too.⁴⁵ Anxieties about capitalist modernity were obviously absent in medieval anti-Judaism.



Figure 1. Selection of cartoons from *Der Stürmer*, 1930–1938.⁴⁶

It also seems that in the rape fantasies of *Der Stürmer*, the problem is not so much that these women are being raped as that they are being raped by Jewish men (rather than their rightful Aryan male possessors).⁴⁷ Dagmar Herzog has aptly talked of “the

45 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*, ed. A. J. P. Taylor (1848; repr., London: Penguin Books, 1967), 83.

46 The captions translate as follows: “Hollywood Vamp: He who lies in the arms of the Jew dies in there” (*Der Stürmer*, no. 28, July 1938); “Legion of disgrace and shame: Ignorant, lured by gold, they stand disgraced in Jewry’s fold. Souls poisoned, blood infected, disaster broods in their wombs” (*Der Stürmer*, no. 37, August 1935); “A goy works a whole year to pay for the price of that dress!” (*Der Stürmer*, no. 2, January 1930); “Snake of Satan Juda: Treacherous, armed with poisoned teeth, the snake is used to rolling around the victim out of Talmud’s sinister reasons” (*Der Stürmer*, no. 23, June 1936); “The Polish girl slaughtered according to religious rites: They lured the girl into the forest, bound and gagged her, drinking the blood from her slashed wrists” (*Der Stürmer*, no. 39, September 1926). For a compendium of similar sexualized imagery on the American far right at the time, see the Anti-Defamation League Poster, “The Propaganda Which Abolished Human Rights Abroad,” n.d. (ca. 1938), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics: Nazism, Box 2.

47 On Nazi men’s assumptions “that they were entitled to almost unlimited access to women’s bodies,” see Regina Mühlhäuser, “Sex, Race, Violence, *Volksgemeinschaft*: German Soldiers’ Sexual Encounters with Local Women and Men during the War and the Occupation in the Soviet Union, 1941–1945,”

sexually inciting elements of Nazism” and noted that for those who fit the prescribed Nazi racial archetypes, new sexual liberties were promised.⁴⁸ And indeed a cartoon from August 1937, two years after the implementation of the Nuremberg Laws, depicted the new sexual ease enjoyed by Aryan men in a Germany no longer beset by allegedly lustful Jewish men (figure 2). All of these caricatures in *Der Stürmer* seem to be designed to invite and gratify the desires of their male readers, playing on a sense of sexual humiliation while also holding out a vision of sexual gratification through overcoming those Jews responsible for German Gentile male impotence. The national impotence that followed the imposition of the Treaty of Versailles, the national humiliation that followed defeat in 1918, and the well-known antisemitic claim that Jews had stabbed the nation in the back seem to collapse here into a more personal sense of sexual impotence, a correlate of what Annette Timm has called “the Nazi project of harnessing emotions to the goals of a racial utopia.”⁴⁹ As in much of the other material studied in this article, this material can be simultaneously read in terms of power, control, humiliation, and sexual desire.



Figure 2. “No entry for Jews: It is really wonderful that today in Germany, one can be among their own again.”⁵⁰

in *Beyond the Racial State: Rethinking Nazi Germany*, ed. Devin Pendas, Mark Roseman, and Richard Wetzell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 455–81.

48 Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 15, 28

49 Annette F. Timm, “Mothers, Whores, or Sentimental Dupes? Emotion and Race in Historiographical Debates about Women in the Third Reich,” in *Beyond the Racial State*, 335.

50 *Der Stürmer*, no. 32, August 1937.

The antisemitic sexual fantasies of *Der Stürmer* are echoed in the “Volk und Rasse” (People and Race) chapter in *Mein Kampf*. Here, Hitler cycles through boilerplate racial antisemitic attacks: Marxism as a Jewish conspiracy for global domination, Jews as an antinational and even antinatural force, insidious Jewish control of the state or domination of the culture. And then, late in the chapter, he identifies a suitably emotive manifestation of all this: “The black-haired Jewboy,” who, Hitler claims, “lurks for hours, Satanic joy on his face, for the unsuspecting girl, stealing her from the [German] people (*Volke*).”⁵¹

In his recent book on “the myth of Judeo-Bolshevism,” Paul Hanebrink has shown how Nazi anti-Soviet propaganda during World War II, particularly as the Soviets started to defeat the Nazis, often used these highly graphic kinds of rape fantasies and allegations as a way to further inflame German opinion against the USSR. Nazi anti-Soviet propaganda was markedly sexualized, often indulging in rape fantasies. In occupied Poland, for example, a widely circulated brochure depicted a Red Army soldier, whip in hand, clutching a helpless Polish woman while a lust-filled Jewish male figure looked on over his shoulder. The image was titled: “The fate of women under the Jewish-Bolshevik whip.”⁵² And this kind of modern sexualized antisemitic propaganda—sometimes race-obsessed, but not necessarily so—has lingered on since then, surfacing in a number of national contexts and acting as a vehicle for a variety of divergent concerns.⁵³

Sexual Antisemitisms and Conservative Anxieties

To return to Ireland, sexual antisemitism echoes in the figure of Leopold Bloom, a sex-obsessed Jew, cuckolded by his wife, who masturbates in public, daydreams of BDSM, and has erotic fantasies about his own daughter (a “[p]ert little piece”).⁵⁴ Fitting with the Pauline division of flesh versus spirit, the carnal figure of Bloom stands in stark contrast to the Greek/Irish/Christian Stephen Dedalus, a man of the spirit rather than of the Jewish flesh. Joyce, for sure, inverted that Pauline conceptualization, presenting earthy Jewish sexuality as superior to dour Catholic self-denial, though he was still operating

51 Adolf Hitler, *Mein Kampf* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, 1942), 357.

52 Paul Hanebrink, *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018), 155. See also *German Women in Soviet Hands: The Journal of a Young German Wife under Bolshevik Occupation from January 29 to May 31, 1945*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Boniface Press, 1962), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics—Antisemitism, Box 11.

53 David Biale began his panoramic survey of Jews and sex by remarking that “[m]odern culture has a fascination with the sexuality of the Jews, a fascination marked by wildly conflicting beliefs,” ranging from claims that Jews, lacking a Pauline partition of body and spirit, had a healthier and more earthy attitude to sexuality, to antisemitic claims that Jews are a uniquely sexual threat to the social order. We can find various examples of this sexual antisemitism across the twentieth century, often united by a certain grim fascination with Jewish sexuality. Biale, *Eros and the Jews*, 1.

54 James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922; repr., New York: Random House, 1986), chaps. 4, 5, 13.

within a familiar framework of Jew-as-Lustful. And perhaps we can hear murmurs of Joyce in the strangest of comparisons: Hugh Hefner, “a lifelong non-Jewish philo-Semite,” asserted his admiration for American Jews in the 1960s for being “more liberal than either American Catholics or the main stream of American Protestantism,” even if they were “not nearly as sexually permissive as the Hebrews of the Old Testament.” Indeed, Hefner’s *Playboy* featured a pictorial on “The Girls of Israel” in 1970 that oscillated between an eroticized version of Zionism and familiar Orientalist tropes about men traveling to the East and there getting easy sexual access to the submissive bodies of exotic women.⁵⁵

Joyce’s frank sexuality won him few favors in an Ireland embracing Catholic social teachings. Both in the 1930s, when a ban on contraception was introduced, and in the 1980s and 1990s, when contraception was made legal again, there were public claims that condoms were a Jewish plot against Catholic Ireland. Jews as a sexually dangerous people—Jewish men especially—is a persistent idea, here helping to express ideas about Irish national purity in the face of alleged foreign sexual dangers.⁵⁶ Post-1922 Irish conservative mores avoided any and all discussions of sex, thus there is none of the potentially titillating content present in other times and places.

In the Leo Frank trial in 1913, one of the most notorious antisemitic moments in modern American history, Tom Watson—populist, nativist, and journalist—described Leo Frank, an Atlanta businessman standing trial for murder, as being “the typical young libertine Jew . . . who has an utter contempt for the law, and a ravenous appetite for the forbidden fruit—a lustful eagerness enhanced by the racial novelty of the girls of the uncircumcised.”⁵⁷ Notice here that Gentile women seem to be presented as having no objective self-determination; they are the “girls” owned by Christian men, “the uncircumcised,” but momentarily stolen by Jewish interlopers. Voyeuristic accusations that Frank was a “habitual seducer” of innocent girls in his factory also appeared in

55 *Playboy* 17, no. 4 (April 1970); Lambert, *Unclean Lips*, 11. The Jewish celebrity sexologist Dr. Ruth Westheimer has more recently claimed that “Judaism is intensely sexual” and “sex, in and of itself, has never been a sin for Jews, or something not to discuss.” Lambert, 11.

56 In testimony to the Irish government’s “Committee on Evil Literature” in 1926, the Jesuit priest and social reformer Richard Devane offered anecdotal evidence of a “jew” [*sic*] found selling contraceptives in Ballina in the rural west; when the Gardaí (the Irish police) failed to stop him, the local parish priest held an ad hoc trial and attempted to extract a £100 fine from him. “The jew paid £10 and cleared out,” National Archives of Ireland, JUS 7/2/9, *Rev. R. S. Devane, S.J., examined*, June 24, 1926. Devane also used coded language to claim Jews were behind the contraceptive trade in Ireland. See his *Indecent Literature: Some Legal Remedies* (Dublin: Browne and Nolan, 1925), which was originally published as an article in the *Irish Ecclesiastical Record*, an official organ of the Irish Catholic hierarchy. For a discussion of sexual antisemitism in 1980s Ireland, see Aidan Beatty, “Irish Modernity and the Politics of Contraception, 1979–1993,” *New Hibernia Review* 17, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 108.

57 Sarah Imhoff, *Masculinity and the Making of American Judaism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 199.

reporting in the *Atlanta Constitution* newspaper and in *Life* magazine.⁵⁸ Claims that Jews “lived lives of unbridled license” were already swirling around the American conservative right by the start of the twentieth century.⁵⁹ It is not at all a coincidence that the pioneers in American censorship and social control, the Comstock Society, had a statistically notable tendency to target Jews far more than Gentiles, reinforcing this sexual antisemitism as well as a very white American racial desire to protect social purity.⁶⁰

The English antisemite Joseph Banister, in his *England Under the Jews* (1901), not only echoed the notion that Jews controlled the sex trade but also that they delighted in the cruelties they bestowed: “No Jew is more of a hero among his fellow tribesmen than the one who can boast of having accomplished the ruin of some friendless, unprotected Christian girl.” Jewish men, Banister claimed, were “the most lecherous breed in existence,” and he expressed a particular unease about English servant girls working for Jews (an anxiety that the Nazis later exhibited—the 1935 Nuremberg Laws prohibited German women under forty-five years of age from working in Jewish homes because of an assumption that such women would be sexual targets).⁶¹ Banister’s book title is probably a plagiarism of Édouard Drumont’s *La France Juive* (1886), which not only employed the same canard about Jews and prostitution but also, in turn, drew on Gougenot des Mousseaux’s 1869 work *Le Juif: Le Judaïsme et la Judaïsation des peuples chrétiens* (*The Jew: Judaism and the Judaization of the Christian Peoples*), where prostitution was labeled “La Morale du Talmud en action.” (Gougenot des Mousseaux, unlike his imitators, was equally excoriating in his views of Jewish women as of Jewish men).⁶² Telemachus Timayenis’s *The Original Mr. Jacobs* (1888), a seminal work of American antisemitism, also cribbed heavily from *La France Juive* and made similar claims. Timayenis remained true to this form in his later works; his book *The American Jew: An Exposé of His Career* contained a chapter on “The Jew Lecher” as

58 Imhoff, 230. For examples of how the American far right continued to exploit the Leo Frank case, see “Leo Frank Case and Today’s Jewish Rape of the South,” *The Thunderbolt: The White Man’s Viewpoint*, no. 26 (February 1961), AJA, MS 0290 Antisemitism Collection, Box 11, Folder 2. This was a “Special Georgia Edition” of the National States Rights Party’s newspaper, which claimed its account of the Frank case was here for the “first time told in full.” See also “Proof Leo Frank Murdered Mary Phagan,” *The Thunderbolt*, no. 275 (March 1982), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics—Antisemitism, Box 18, 1982 Folder.

59 Jenna Weissman Joselit, *Our Gang: Jewish Crime and the New York Jewish Community, 1900–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1983), 6.

60 Lambert, *Unclean Lips*, 6.

61 Joseph Banister, *England under the Jews* (London: Joseph Banister, 1901), 39; Schaffer, “Perverts and Purists,” 106–7. The Jewish country singer Kinky Friedman lampooned such sexualized antisemitic claims in his 1974 song “They Ain’t Makin’ Jews Like Jesus Anymore”: “Well, a redneck nerd in a bowling shirt was a-guzzlin’ Lone Star beer / Talking religion and-uh politics for all the world to hear / They oughta send you back to Russia, boy, or New York City-One / You just want to doodle a Christian girl and you killed God’s only son.”

62 Gougenot des Mousseaux, *Le Juif: Le Judaïsme et la Judaïsation des peuples chrétiens* (Paris: Henri Plon, 1869), 405; Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 22.

well as an extended chapter on “Customs and Habits of the Jews,” which displayed a clear fascination with “this strange and mysterious people,” their alleged lustful desires for Gentile women, and the supposed sexual license they enjoyed, all of which was minutely described.⁶³ In 1970, the neo-Nazi *Liberator* newspaper ran an article on the “Kings of Porno,” who were unsurprisingly labeled as Jews but with a tone bordering on titillation: “Everybody knows that some pretty raunchy stuff is being printed and filmed these days. But not many people have bothered to acquaint themselves with the vital statistics of the industry which churns the stuff out and peddles it.”⁶⁴

Fin-de-siècle German antisemites such as Thomas Fritsch and Alexander Berg, author of the “semi-pornographic” *Juden-Bordelle*, also trafficked in allegations about Jews and the sex trade.⁶⁵ Stereotypes about Jews and the sex trade were so common in early twentieth-century Argentina that *polaca*, referring to immigrant women from eastern Europe, implicitly Jewish, became a common term for “prostitute.”⁶⁶ *Polaca* functioned as a similar code in Brazil. And in the years leading up to President Getúlio Vargas’s declaration of an “Estado Novo” in 1937, the “Cohen Plan” conspiracy theory fabricated a Jewish-communist plot to invade the houses of wealthy Brazilians and rape them. The Cohen Plan was widely disseminated across Brazil, and Vargas used the mood created to authorize a new military coup, promulgate a new constitution, and take control of a full-fledged dictatorship. As the writer Orides Mezzaroba said in 1992, “The objective of the Plan was to create an emotional environment, conducive to the rapid acceptance of the coup and the new Constitution by the population, as emergency national salvation measures.”⁶⁷ The journalist Vincent Bevins characterizes *Plano Cohen* as a “parable of unique communist evil” in which communism was associated “with pure evil or witchcraft, drawn with the use of demons or Satanic beasts, such as dragons, snakes, and goats. There was often the implication, or outright depiction, of sexual perversion and deviancy.”⁶⁸ “Jews,” I would add, were clearly being folded into the category of “communists” in these sexualized fantasies of the Brazilian right, in which

63 Telemachus Timayenis, *The Original Mr. Jacobs: A Startling Exposé* (New York: Minerva, 1888); Telemachus Timayenis, *The American Jew: An Exposé of His Career* (New York: Minerva, 1888). Both of these works were rediscovered and republished in the later twentieth century by white supremacists. For background, see Scott D. Seligman, “He Was the Father of Anti-Semitic Publishing in America,” *Forward*, February 5, 2020.

64 “Kings of Porno,” *The National Socialist Liberator*, no. 5 (March 1970), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics—Antisemitism, Box 15, 1970 Folder. This paper was published by the National Socialist Liberation Front, the Virginia-based youth-wing of George Lincoln Rockwell’s American Nazi Party.

65 Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 250–51.

66 Yarfitz, *Impure Migration*, 2–3.

67 Orides Mezzaroba, “Plano Cohen: A Consolidação Do Anticomunismo No Brasil” [Cohen Plan: The consolidation of anticommunism in Brazil], *Revista Sequência* (September 1992): 94.

68 Vincent Bevins, *The Jakarta Method: Washington’s Anticommunist Crusade and the Mass Murder Program that Shaped Our World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020), 103.

violations of the male homestead and an anxiety about communist threats to property were expressed via sexual antisemitism.

Even more bizarre was the fantasy that coalesced during a resurgent white-slave panic that swept Orléans, Grenoble, and other French cities in the late 1960s, when Jewish boutique owners were charged with drugging teenage girls in their fitting rooms and spiriting them along underground passages to waiting submarines.⁶⁹ And Henrietta Mondry has shown how anxieties about glasnost in 1980s and 1990s Russia often zeroed in on “the Uncensored Sexed Body of the Jew,” when a newly liberalized book market “was flooded with semi-pornographic and hard pornographic material depicting devious and criminal behavior. This new art was dubbed *pornukha* and *chernukha*—pornography and dark perversion (*chernyi* refers to the color black)—and included murder, sadistic sex, and every form of pathologic expression of basic instincts.” In the literature Mondry analyzes, Jewish men are depicted as having both a bisexual or ambiguous sexual identity as well as a dangerous desire to sexually possess Russian Gentile women.⁷⁰ Taken collectively, what all these examples show is that very specific anxieties, localized in time and place, are expressed through a shared vocabulary and set of images. There was clearly a horror of Jewish sexual danger here—and that is how they are conventionally interpreted—but the focus on libertinism and on sexual freedom existing outside the rules of normative society points to a different interpretation: that Jewish men enjoy sexual excitement denied to the rest of us.

Also worth recounting are the curious ways in which antisemitic views of sexually dangerous Jewish men coexist with similarly essentialized, if more sexually conventional, beliefs that Jewish women are exotic and sexually exciting while also still somehow dangerous.⁷¹ In one historian’s overview, the Jewish woman was imagined as “an ambiguous, erotically threatening fantasy” before transmogrifying in the 1920s, with the rise of cinema, into “the veritable incarnation of the femme fatale.” And as Jean-Paul Sartre analyzed it, the trope of the “beautiful Jewess” carried a unique and “very special sexual signification,” bound up with images of rape during Russian pogroms.⁷²

69 Bristow, *Prostitution and Prejudice*, 45–46.

70 Henrietta Mondry, *Constructing the Jew in Russian Culture, 1880s to 2008* (Brookline, MA: Academic Studies Press, 2009), 168–87.

71 David Greven, “Hawthorne and the Gender of Jewishness: Anti-Semitism, Aesthetics, and Sexual Politics in *The Marble Faun*,” *Journal of American Culture* 35, no. 2 (2012): 135–52. Nadia Valman talks of “the irresistible erotic appeal of the ‘Jewess’” in Victorian literature. See Valman, *Jewess*, 2. In the plates accompanying the 1724 work *Jüdisches Ceremoniel*, written by the Jewish apostate Paul Christian Kirchner, various male Jewish rituals are depicted in a dry and quasi-ethnographic style (a tone at odds with the anti-Jewish register of the text itself); conversely, in a plate entitled “Reinigung der Weiber im Bad” (Cleaning the women in the bath), the female Jewish space of a mikveh is inaccurately depicted as a playfully erotic space of nude women cavorting in the water. Paul Christian Kirchner, *Jüdisches Ceremoniel, oder, Beschreibung dererjenigen Gebräuche* [Jewish Ceremonial, or, a description of their customs] (Frankfurt: Peter Conrad Monath, 1724), plate 24.

72 Stefanie Schüler-Springorum, “Gender and the Politics of Anti-Semitism,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 1215–16; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker

Sartre calls the Jewess a literary “sexual symbol” who desires Christian men and desires to be converted herself but is generally rejected if not “violated or beaten,” even if she is also initially an object of desire. Nevertheless, there are certainly examples of female figures in antisemitic visual material that were more vile than erotic: the series of anti-Dreyfusard political posters entitled *Musée des Horreurs* depicted Jewish women as being physically ugly and sexually monstrous, part of a general horror of Jews on the part of French conservatives in the 1890s.⁷³ Viewed from a very high vantage point, all of the material studied in this article shares anxieties about literal or ideational borders and about those with the agency to violate those borders, whether that is apostate monks flirting with heterodoxy or converted Jewish men with an alleged desire to violate both the nation and its women. As sexist fantasies, the idea that only men have agency predominates. Jewish women are thus either ignored, treated as submissive receptacles for male Gentile attentions, or seen as suitable candidates for conversion to Christianity.

The Great Replacement Theory

In their recent book on Los Angeles in the 1960s, Mike Davis and Jon Wiener discuss a “toxic rumor” that circulated in southern California in the summer of 1964: “By the eve of the November election, it had spread virally across the entire country and infected political debate everywhere.” In a story variously set in different suburbs of the city, a group of adult Black men was said to have castrated a three-year-old white boy in a public bathroom. In versions of the story that circulated in white neighborhoods adjacent to Hispanic sections of LA, the assailants became Mexican. “Everyone” (everyone white, that is) was aware of this story and knew someone that knew someone who could allegedly verify the details, all of which had supposedly been covered up by a biased liberal media. But then Paul Coates, a columnist for the *Los Angeles Times*, discovered a telling etiology for the rumor when he received letters from three different readers who had lived in 1930s Germany: the “same story” had been used by Nazi leaders to enrage Hitler Youth before pogroms. “Only then, the ‘little white boy’ was a German boy, and the ‘colored hoodlums’ were Jews.”⁷⁴

An American white supremacist racism informed by Nazi antisemitism was clearly at work in this 1960s urban legend. But so also was sex, as specifically shown by the sheer excess of sexual details in this lurid story. A specific variety of American pornographic antisemitism—which oscillates between humiliation and gratification—has been developing for several decades. American antiblack racism cross-pollinated

(New York: Schocken Books, 1948), 48–49.

73 No. 48, *Charlotte Mayer* and No. 46, *Lénora*, JHU, MS-0422 Jean-Marie Goulemot Dreyfus Affair Collection, Box 3.

74 Paul Coates, “An Ugly Lie, Once Nailed Here, Spreads Eastward to Maryland,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 20, 1965; Mike Davis and Jon Wiener, *Set the Night On Fire: L.A. in the Sixties* (London: Verso, 2020), 113.

with antisemitism throughout the twentieth century, with claims, for example, that “Jews” are the true masterminds of the Civil Rights Movement, since Black men were assumed to not have the proper political agency or basic human intelligence to steer such a mass movement.

The claim that Black and Jewish men are united in their desires to defile white womanhood (even if their sexualities are imagined as quite different—sex-obsessed but in weak Jewish bodies for which white women allegedly have no desire, sex-obsessed and in Black bodies to which white women are supposedly overly attracted) has been common on the post-1945 American far right (figure 3).⁷⁵ Sexually graphic images of Jews as rapists or as lustful devils are common currency here. In the late 1950s, for example, the Christian Patriots Crusade—connected to both the segregationist National States Rights Party and one iteration of the Ku Klux Klan—produced handbills depicting a naked woman bound to a giant Star of David and being whipped by a male Jewish figure.⁷⁶ In another piece from the same period, the central image depicted a seemingly unconscious white woman in the arms of a Black male lover and/or rapist, which was captioned “the result of race-mixing.” The sly-winking, stereotypically Jewish man on the same handbill was clearly the architect of this sexual contact, an accusation bluntly made clear by the title: “Save the White Race: The Hell-Inspired Jews Seek to Destroy the White Race.”⁷⁷ This kind of material draws on the same racial fears as Hitler’s accusation that sexually dangerous Jews were bringing Black men into the industrial heart of Germany for nefarious purposes. “[A]lways with the same ulterior motive and clear goals,” Hitler said, “to destroy the white race [*weiße Rasse*] that they detest through the bastardization that inevitably occurs, knocking them from their cultural and political heights and rising to be their masters themselves.”⁷⁸ For Hitler, as for late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century American white nationalists, sexual contamination and destruction are bound up with Jewish cultural contamination and the destruction of the nation; this antisemitism is inherently sexual in content.

75 See, for example, “Niggers, You Too Can Be a Jew,” American Nazi Party handbill, n.d. (ca. 1960), AJA, MS 0290, Box 1, Folder 10; “How the Levellers Are Destroying America,” *Closer Up* pamphlet, n.d. (ca. 1957–1960), MS 0290, Box 3, Folder 8; “Jews Finance Race Mixing,” *Klan Bulletin* (March 1961), AJA, MS 0290, Box 7, Folder; “Boating Not Busing,” National Socialist White People’s Party handbill, n.d. (ca. early 1970s), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics: Nazism, Box 3.

76 “Freedom of Jewish Tyranny?,” Christian Patriots Crusade handbill, n.d. (ca. 1959), AJA, MS 0290, Box 3, Folder 5.

77 “Save the White Race,” Christian Patriots Crusade handbill, n.d. (ca. 1959), AJA, MS 0290, Box 3, Folder 5. See also the cartoon of a sexualized Jew/Satan in *Grass Roots* 8, no. 93 (May 1960), AJA, MS 0290, Box 9, Folder 6.

78 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 357.



Figure 3. A National States Rights Party handbill warning of Jews' alleged desire to destroy racial difference.⁷⁹

As white nationalism moves more and more into the mainstream as Trumpism, this sexual antisemitism has metastasized into the “Great Replacement Theory,” in which Jews are said to be masterminding a population decline of the white race. The fear of racial dilution at work here is also a fear of miscegenation and the “wrong” kinds of sexual contact, since these, along with immigration, are assumed to be the means by which the “replacement” is being carried out. This sexual conspiracy theory has deep roots in white nationalism while also tapping into contemporary fears of migration and rapid social change. It has also become one of the most popular contemporary antisemitic conspiracy theories of the so-called alt-right and increasingly accepted within the GOP.⁸⁰

⁷⁹ “Integration Is Jewish,” National States Rights Party handbill, n.d. (ca. 1958), AJA, MS 0290, Box 11, Folder 1.

⁸⁰ Nazis claimed, in almost a foreshadowing of the Great Replacement conspiracy theory, that “abortion rights were defended by Jews in order to secure their dominion over the Aryan peoples.” Herzog, *Sex after Fascism*, 21. Hitler himself believed that a similar replacement was underway in France as a result of colonial racial mixing. Thomas Piketty, *Capital and Ideology*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge,

What is less noticed, perhaps, is the implied second half of this story: that white men—with possible echoes of *Dr. Strangelove*—are being offered a potential Jew-free future in which they get unfettered access to white women so as to repopulate a supposedly decimated white race.⁸¹ Mark Collett, a former high-ranking member of the antisemitic and Islamophobic British National Party, has described the sexual freedoms of the twenty-first century as an attack on white men. According to Collett, white men have been deprived “of their females,” such that “the white man is not the dominant man, the white man is not on top, in fact, he is now a second class citizen,” and as such he is “a conquered man . . . a man who has lost control of his nation, his females and in a way his own destiny.”⁸² The flip side of this story will be the pleasing return of white male authority and a monopoly on sexual access.⁸³ This is neatly encoded by the so-called *fourteen words*—“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”—coined by the white supremacist David Lane and now acting as a sort of mantra for the American far right. One way to understand Lane’s slogan is as an antisemitic invitation to engage in gratifying sexualized fantasies as well as the fantasy that second-wave feminism and the Civil Rights Movement (both assumed to be Jewish plots because women and African Americans are denied political agency while Jews are assumed, in another long-standing

MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 477n90. Within the Republican Party and its broader ecosystem, J. D. Vance, Steve Bannon, Stephen Miller, and Tucker Carlson have all made statements that seem to accord with the conspiracy theory, but often with a (probably intentional) plausible deniability. See “A List of MAGA Republicans Who Took the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Mainstream,” Center for American Progress, May 18, 2022, www.americanprogressaction.org/article/a-list-of-maga-republicans-who-took-the-great-replacement-theory-mainstream/; Judd Legum, “Republicans Have Invoked the ‘Great Replacement’ Theory Over and Over,” *Guardian*, May 17, 2022, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2022/may/17/republicans-have-invoked-the-great-replacement-theory-over-and-over.

81 Lavin, *Culture Warlords*; Kristoff Kerl, “‘Oppression by Orgasm’: Pornography and Antisemitism in Far-Right Discourses in the United States since the 1970s,” *Studies in American Jewish Literature* 39, no.1 (2020): 117–38; Nikki McCann Ramirez, “A Racist Conspiracy Theory Called the ‘Great Replacement’ Has Made Its Way from Far-Right Media to the GOP,” *Business Insider*, September 7, 2020, www.businessinsider.com/racist-great-replacement-conspiracy-far-alt-right-gop-mainstream-2020-9. The conspiracy theory is often traced to the French writer Jean Raspail and his 1973 novel *Le Camp des Saints*. As I have been suggesting, though, it is a conspiracy theory drawing on broader international trends, not least German National Socialism and American nativism and white supremacy.

82 Kerl, “Oppression by Orgasm,” 128. See also Simon Purdue, “Useful Victims: Symbolic Rage and Racist Violence on the Global Extreme-Right,” *Journal for De-Radicalization* 27 (Summer 2021): 34–70.

83 The short-lived pseudo-intellectual far-right journal *Northern World* regularly featured idealized images of white femininity on its front covers, such as a “Typical Swedish Beauty from Stockholm” (July–August 1959) and “The Lovely Features of Uta” (Autumn 1960), and thus clearly invited its readers to imagine the sexual access they could gain to such women. AJA, MS 0290 Antisemitism Collection, Box 11, Folder 7. Similarly, in 1963, mixing desire, jealousy, and antisemitism, the American Nazi Party’s in-house magazine ran a salacious piece on the Profumo Scandal, including both a photo of a scantily clad Christine Keeler and a close-up description of the “wild and shameful, sex-studded, illicit life” she and Mandy Rice-Davis enjoyed. “The Jew Behind Christine’s Race-mixing Orgy,” *The Stormtrooper* 2, no. 4 (July–August 1963), AJA, Nearprint Special Topics—Antisemitism, Box 12.

antisemitic trope, to be fiendishly crafty) will be undone and thus white male authority returned. The Great Replacement Theory promises to return sexual agency to white men, simultaneously denying it to women and Black people and removing it from those Jews who are blamed for damaging white male agency in the first place. Antisemitism is potentially an aesthetic technology, one that catalyzes a diversity of anxieties into a sexual frisson.⁸⁴

Conclusion

The kinds of pornographic antisemitism studied across this article exist in vastly different historical contexts and have acted as vehicles for very different anxieties, whether a sense of national impotence in post-Versailles Germany, a fear of Black emancipation after Jim Crow, anxieties about the sexual boundaries of the nation in independent Ireland, or the perceived dangers of apostasy in medieval western Christendom. But differences aside, they engaged in a shared sexual vocabulary and a shared set of tropes about Jewish sexual difference and Jewish sexual danger. This sexualized vocabulary, benefitting from that perceived continuity over time, is malleable enough to be deployed in a variety of times and places while retaining a certain coherency. As Heschel has asserted, “antisemitism is never enclosed in the past; rather, antisemitism can be understood as a reservoir of possibility waiting to be activated by the present.”⁸⁵ The political forces behind antisemitism shift radically while the form that antisemitic visual and literary culture takes remains largely the same. And figures as diverse as the Irish Redemptorist priest John Creagh, the inventor of *Plano Cohen*, and online trolls who denounce their enemies as “cucks” have all been able to draw on this sexualized vocabulary and its attendant imagery.

Maurice Samuels has made the apposite point that overly repeated antisemitic stereotypes offer “the satisfaction of recognition” rather than an “authenticity of experience” that they cannot deliver.⁸⁶ Going even further than this, I would argue that antisemitism is also satisfying in personal, emotional, and sexual ways. And my own sense is that historians, in describing the grotesqueness of antisemitism, often unconsciously assume that everyone else finds this stuff equally grotesque and horrible. What we thus miss is that, for antisemites, antisemitism is an often deeply sensuous and sometimes even an erotic experience. In several cases it even seems to have been purposively designed to do all that (or at the least, it was received by its audience in that way). And as an open-ended

84 I am borrowing this concept from Lambert, who talks about “obscene modernism” as an “aesthetic technology” that transformed “Jewishness, poverty, and sexual shame into cultural prestige.” See *Unclean Lips*, 79. Consider also Maurice Samuels’s view: “[T]he anti-Semite’s vision is ultimately an aesthetic one: the Jew represents the violation of an ideal of purity, a kind of interloper or contaminant that must be eliminated in order for the anti-Semite’s dream of organic wholeness to be realized.” See his “Literature and the Study of Anti-Semitism,” *American Historical Review* 123, no. 4 (2018): 1223–33, at 1232.

85 Heschel, “Likrat,” 76–77.

86 Samuels, “Literature,” 1225.

conclusion, perhaps antisemitism continues to emerge in succeeding generations partly because so many people derive these erotic pleasures from it.

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ARTICLE

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Similarity Heuristics in the Indian Far Right

How the RSS Obscures Its Operational Scale

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Abstract: *To conceal their activities, far-right networks manipulate similarity heuristics that suggest their constituent organizations are discrete and coherent. When an organization crafts a public image indicating that only those who wear the same uniforms and march in the same marches are part of an organization, it implies that those who do not, are not. This use of cognitive shortcuts assists far-right organizations in crafting their organizational boundaries to obscure internal divisions of labor. That these disguised internal divisions of labor exist is strong evidence to support a renewed focus on the intra-organizational dynamics of far-right organizations—a focus that pivots from a discursive to a materialist understanding of the far right. I use the case of the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), one of the world’s largest far-right organizations, to argue that similarity heuristics disguise far-right connectivity. Paying granular attention to the organizational boundary-making practices of the RSS demonstrates that the true organizational focus of the RSS is its managerial manifestation, rather than its cadre division, which is just one organization the managerial RSS manages. This key finding suggests that scholars must focus on the mechanics of the managerial RSS over the aesthetic phenomenon of the cadre RSS. Such a focus inevitably leads to a network-centric approach to the Indian far right that better captures the mechanics of its mobilization.*

Keywords: far right, organizational networks, RSS, Indian politics, Hindu nationalism, covert networks

Far-right organizations often face pressure to conceal their activities.¹ Where they seek to challenge the status quo, they do so to avoid state scrutiny. Where they seek to reinforce the status quo (e.g., far-right militias tied to ruling parties), they do so to protect the collective legitimacy of their organizational network. Far-right organizations

1 I use far right to collectively refer to organizational ecosystems that include both categories in Cas Mudde’s widely used distinction between radical and extreme right. Cas Mudde, *Populist Radical Right Parties in Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

hide in diverse ways. Some submerge themselves and go underground to remove themselves from public view.² Others develop separate fronts to conduct activities that the original organization cannot.³ Yet others disguise themselves as something they are not, such as a social club.⁴

I argue another option exists, and indeed that this option has been critical to the success of one of the world's largest far-right organizations: the Indian Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Corps, RSS). I argue that the RSS has built an exaggerated public image of unity, coherence, and discipline that suggests it is only *one* organization, that it does *one* thing in *one* way, and that it could not possibly do anything else. Through uniformed public rituals and a mythology of corporate discipline, organizations like the RSS cultivate a similarity heuristic through which *only* those who do *RSS things* belong to the RSS. Those who do not wear the uniform, march in the parades, sing the songs, or perform the salutes could not possibly be in the RSS, despite being embedded in other ways. This boundary making becomes a critical way that the RSS manages its relationships with the broader Hindu nationalist network that it leads.

Associating with a highly aesthetic public image allows the RSS to deny its connection to any activities that do not resemble this image. In this case, the RSS relies on a public similarity heuristic that declares that if it does not walk like the RSS or talk like the RSS, it is not the RSS. The RSS presents a useful entry point into the covert behavior of far-right organizations because it has a very clear, well-defined public image, but it is also visible in many apparently external activities like violence, political lobbying, and institutional penetration. How can we square the public image of the RSS with what appears to be its much more diffuse programs? The many activities of the RSS that exist outside its public mythology become deniable because they exist outside the public boundaries the RSS has drawn for itself. The RSS—the apex organization of the world's largest far-right network—pretends to be *only one thing* to conceal the many activities that it does not want people to pay attention to.

In this article, I argue that this view of the RSS and its affiliates is misleading and that the public mythology of RSS unity and singularity obscures the material patterns of Hindu nationalist organizing in India, which are actually far more diffuse. I propose an alternative view of the RSS, its internal organizing, and its organizational relationship to this broader network. Instead of understanding the RSS as a single, coherent organizational unit, I argue that the RSS is, in fact, two functionally separate

2 For example, the Indonesian Front Pembela Islam (Islamic Defenders' Front) operates clandestinely, particularly since the 2020 Indonesian government ban on the organization.

3 For example, the Turkish Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party,) outsources its violence to its youth wing, commonly known as the Grey Wolves.

4 For example, the Australian Lads Society is a far-right white nationalist organization that has variously masqueraded as a men's only social club, or a gym.

organizations: a cadre RSS and a managerial RSS. I suggest that this obfuscation is made possible by the strategic manipulation of similarity heuristics.

A similarity heuristic is a cognitive shortcut in which decision-makers decide that like causes like and that appearance is reality.⁵ If, for example, a round red fruit and a knobbly green fruit were placed in front of someone, they would likely presume that the red fruit was the apple *because it looked like* apples they had eaten before. They would believe that the knobbly green fruit was not an apple *because it did not look like* any apple they had eaten before. If something resembles something we know, we categorize it as something that we know. If something does *not* look like something we know, we tend to assume that we do not know it. Such a shortcut, which draws on existing experience and knowledge, is a tool we use to maximize the efficiency of decision-making and minimize the risks of uncertainty.⁶ A similarity heuristic conceals the way that sometimes things that look familiar are actually strange, and that things that look strange are actually familiar. The red fruit may actually be a hyper-realistic apple confection, and the green fruit actually just an apple grown from a peculiar orchard!

This reflexive cognitive behavior may be strategically used by far-right organizations to direct the gaze of its scrutineers, which is how, I argue, the RSS conceals much of its activity. By relying on a highly aestheticized core organizational membership that wears the same uniforms, performs the same rituals, and attends the same parades; by emphasizing an organizational commitment to coherence, discipline, and loyalty; and by loudly and repeatedly declaring its independence from other organizations, the RSS attempts to draw very sharp images of what the RSS *looks like*. What the RSS *looks like* is then supposed to become, in the public imagination, what the RSS *is*. In the production of this image of a coherent, unitary, and independent RSS, the organization successfully obscures its internal divisions of labor and the way these interact with the thousands of RSS appendage organizations.

My proposition in this article is not simply a repetition of the common organizational sociological truism that some organizations appear as one thing to outsiders and another thing to insiders. A discussion of strategic similarity heuristics goes beyond this in two ways. First, it provides a functional account of organizational secrecy. While we know that organizations can be covert, the precise mechanisms of how organizations conceal themselves often remain opaque. Secrecy is more substantial than simply *not telling* but rather consists of a series of behavioral and cognitive mechanisms that must be understood if we seek to move beyond simplistic descriptions of covert and overt. Discussing strategic similarity heuristics as a mechanism of *being covert* is a move in

5 Paul Rozin and Carol Nemeroff, "Sympathetic Magical Thinking: The Contagion and Similarity 'Heuristics,'" in *Heuristics and Biases: The Psychology of Intuitive Judgement*, ed. Thomas Gilovich, Dale Griffin, and Daniel Kahneman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2002), 201–16.

6 Daniel Read and Yael Grushka-Cockayne, "The Similarity Heuristic," *Journal of Behavioral Decision Making* 24 (2010): 23–46.

this direction. Second, the discussion of strategic similarity heuristics focuses on how covert organizations' boundaries produce covertness, rather than the obfuscation of their organizational content. Crudely, my discussion in this article is about how big we are led to believe the box is—and how we are led to believe it—rather than about simply what is in the box.

The cadre RSS that I propose, which consists of ordinary *swayamsevaks* (volunteers), whose main manifestation is the *shakha* (branch) system, is largely concerned with fundraising, occasional electoral or service provision mobilization, and symbolic leadership. Importantly, it also acts as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS, for which the cadre RSS serves as a crucial test of commitment. However, the main work of the Hindu nationalist movement that the RSS leads is external to the cadre RSS, appearing instead in the hundreds of RSS-linked organizations.

The managerial RSS that I propose is entirely devoted to managing this network. This work is almost entirely separate from the activities and rituals of the cadre RSS. To retain control over this network, the RSS developed a sophisticated system of deputation and executive diffusion to manage the hundreds of organizations that orbit the RSS. This system, at whose core is a network of *pracharaks* (preachers) that I explain below, is functionally separate from the cadre RSS, which becomes simply one among many organizations that the managerial RSS manages.

This conceptual reconfiguration is not merely semantic. Dissecting the RSS into its constituent pieces has implications for those who seek to challenge far-right organizing. If we accept that the cadre RSS is just one organization among many that the managerial RSS directs, then focusing political and organizational energy on the baton-wielding, khaki trouser-wearing, goose-stepping RSS is misleading. Instead, the attention should be on the sprawling managerial RSS. This implies that rather than studying organizational nodes like the cadre RSS, we should be focusing on far-right linkages visible through organizations like the managerial RSS. These material linkages, more than far-right network nodes, reveal patterns of power, authority, and communication. This focus in turn demands that we begin to build a picture of which organizations, *exactly*, does the managerial RSS exert control over? What *exactly* are the organizational capacities of the RSS? We can only answer these questions if we pick apart the RSS into its constituent units.

There are a number of key points that emerge from such a reconfiguration. First, the idea that far-right organizations have internal divisions of labor that are disguised by similarity heuristics supports scholarly calls for a research agenda on the *intra-organizational* dynamics of far-right organizations.⁷ Second, this research focus inevitably directs us away from a discursive understanding of the far right and toward

7 See, for example, Pietro Castelli Gattinara, "The Study of the Far Right and Its Three E's: Why Scholarship Must Go Beyond Eurocentrism, Electoralism and Externalism," *French Politics* 18 (2020): 314–33.

a more materialist, operational one that seeks to discover how far-right organizations *function*.⁸ Third, regarding the RSS more precisely, this article's findings suggest that analytically we must disassociate the work of the cadre RSS—which I argue primarily revolves around producing the social bonds necessary for occasional mobilization—from that of the managerial RSS, where the most impactful work of the RSS lies.

Understanding the success of the RSS should be one of the core research agendas in the study of the global far right. The RSS manages a transnational network of thousands of organizations, including a political party that governs roughly 18 percent of the world's population. The organizational network that the RSS sits atop is the world's oldest extant, richest, and largest far-right mobilization. It therefore becomes, in many ways, the *key* global case for understanding far-right success. While the strategic similarity heuristics that I argue are at the heart of the RSS's success are not universal within, or exclusive to, the far right, I suggest that they may be useful in understanding networked far-right behavior—especially where far-right organizations are both covert and make public claims. The tension between having to hide activities like violence and extreme bigotry while maintaining an external claims-making engagement strategy means that boundary making becomes crucial for such organizations. For far-right organizations seeking public influence without public scrutiny this means clearly delineating the public image of what an organization *is* and *is not*. Certainly, this is not unique to the far right, but the case of the RSS is a useful way of understanding how far-right organizations navigate the contradictions between being covert and publicly claims-making at the same time.

To substantiate these points, I undertake an organizational charting of the RSS's internal bureaucratic structure. I begin by outlining the contours of the current public image of the RSS, focusing on its operational bureaucracy and its reputation as a machine for forging model Hindu men. Next, I offer an alternative vision of the RSS, one in which it is organizationally divisible into a cadre and managerial RSS. I argue that this division is concealed in order to use the public spectacle of the cadre RSS to distract from the importance of the managerial RSS's other extensive work. I conclude by tying this obfuscation into the central argument of this article, which is that far-right organizations can strategically use similarity heuristics to obfuscate those of their activities that do not resemble the organizational image they project.

A Public RSS

Since its foundation in 1925, the RSS, the apex organization of the broader Hindu nationalist movement, has sought to reshape India into a Hindu ethnostate through

8 See Antonis Ellinas, *Organizing against Democracy: The Local Organizational Development of Far Right Parties in Greece and Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2020), for such a discussion in the context of far-right parties in Europe.

violence, lobbying, electoral mobilization, service provision, and proselytization.⁹ In its pursuit of this goal, the RSS has been quite successful. Since at least the 1980s, thanks largely to the RSS's maneuvering, political parties of all stripes have made Hindu nationalist appeals in order to win conservative votes, mainstreaming a set of ideological positions that decades ago were considered fringe extremism. The RSS's political appendage, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People's Party, BJP) has held national power since 2014; Prime Minister Narendra Modi is an ex-RSS official; and RSS veterans lead state governments across the country. Never before has the RSS had access to this kind of hegemony-building power.

Study of the RSS has overwhelmingly focused on its Hindu nationalist ideology rather than on its material operational mechanics. In many ways, this is a reflection of a disciplinary focus on ideology as the key measure of *far rightness*, as well as a reliance on a traditional Weberian understanding of the formal organization that highlights formal written procedures, a rigid boundedness, a clear and explicit bureaucratic division of labor, and systems of formal record keeping. This focus on the formal organization in the study of the RSS has largely failed to integrate the findings of scholars who question these hard formal organizational borders and instead emphasize the porosity and flexibility of these borders in any social organization.¹⁰ It is this porosity and malleability that I argue here acts as a great reservoir of strategic strength for the RSS.

In the context of the Indian far right, while the focus on far-right ideology is an inevitable result of studying organizations that conceal their operational processes, what little we know about the RSS's materiality we already broadly knew in 1951,¹¹ with only a handful of substantive additions in the following seventy years.¹² This dearth of material analysis of the RSS's operations means that we do not have a good idea of how power and authority move through the RSS and its extended organizational network,

9 Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (Delhi: Radhakrishna Prakashan, 2000); Christophe Jaffrelot, *Modi's India: Hindu Nationalism and the Rise of Ethnic Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2021).

10 For example, Göran Ahrne, "Organization outside Organization: The Significance of Partial Organization," *Organization* 18 (2011): 83–104; Donatella della Porta, Joseba Fernández, Hara Kouki, and Lorenzo Mosca, *Movement Parties against Austerity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor–Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

11 J. A. Curran Jr., *Militant Hinduism in Indian Politics: A Study of the RSS* (New York: Institute of Pacific Relations, 1951). This book served as key source material for most subsequent studies of the RSS.

12 For example, Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1987); Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and India Politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (London: Hurst & Company, 1996); Thomas Blom Hansen, *The Saffron Wave: Democracy and Hindu Nationalism in Modern India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999); Des Raj Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 2000); Pralay Kanungo, *RSS Tryst with Politics: From Hedgerwar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2002).

let alone money and information. Before we can ascertain how these pieces all *move*, we must first revisit and clarify what the organizational mechanics of the RSS actually are.

If we are to believe the RSS,¹³ its sympathizers,¹⁴ and indeed many of its critics,¹⁵ the roots of its success lie in the RSS's commitment to discipline, organicism, and a coherent organizational structure through which *swayamsevaks* (volunteers) move upwardly through the RSS's bureaucratic hierarchy. The mythology of the RSS emphasizes the socialization and conditioning of *swayamsevaks* into uniquely ideologically devoted workers of the RSS who can carry out its sole task: the making of model Hindu men. Early RSS leaders saw the RSS as a machine, embodied in the *shakha* (branch) system that transforms divided, weak Hindus into martial nationalist men in ways that mirror other far-right commitments to bodily purity and masculinity.¹⁶ Within the branch, the performance of Hindu-coded games, the recitation of Sanskrit prayers, and the focus on the physical development of the body collectively attempt to rescue Hindu men from an alleged degeneracy, effeminacy, and passivity that early Hindu nationalists saw as the root of India's problems. Sangh leader H. V. Seshadri wrote:

[T]he Swayamsevak is the sole medium through which the Sangh seeks to translate its vision into a reality. This view of the Sangh, in turn, stems from its conviction that it is man who makes or mars society. It is the level of the character, the calibre of the average man, that ultimately decides the level of the nation's progress.¹⁷

These *swayamsevaks*—which the RSS *makes*—have supposedly crafted the RSS into a uniquely coherent and unified organization through shared commitment to a common ideology and through the performance of shared rituals like the RSS *prarthna* (prayer), its organizational festivals, its common uniform, or the notorious *path sanchalan* (route march). The success of this highly formalized and coherent organizational system, the narrative goes, dovetails into a broader network of Hindu nationalist organizations that the RSS claims it remains loosely affiliated with and sympathetic to, but from which it is functionally independent. I seek to challenge the understanding that the RSS is a uniquely disciplined and coherent activist organization, whose *swayamsevaks*

13 Sunil Ambekar, *The RSS: Roadmaps for the 21st Century* (New Delhi: Rupa Publications India, 2019).

14 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*.

15 Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

16 See Lalit Vachani, "The *Shakha*, the Home and the World: Going Beyond the *Shakha* and the RSS Family," in *Women, Gender and Religious Nationalism*, ed. Amrita Basu and Tanika Sarkar (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2022), 77–124; see also Ian McDonald, "Political Somatics: Fascism, Physical Culture and the Sporting Body," in *Physical Culture, Power and the Body*, ed. Patricia Vertinsky and Jennifer Hargreaves (London: Routledge, 2007), 52–73.

17 H. V. Seshadri, *RSS: A Vision in Action* (Bangalore: Jagarana Prakashana, 1988), 16.

work hard through service provision and community work to advocate for an India in which Hinduism plays a central role and Hindus receive privileges above non-Hindus. In this imagining of the RSS's public life, the RSS purportedly inspires and leads a constellation of independent allied organizations seeking the same goal through religious mobilization, publishing, health care provision, and proselytization.

Both sympathetic and critical accounts describe an RSS with a neat, streamlined organizational structure, which transforms young men with a vague, inchoate Hindu nationalist disposition into disciplined *swayamsevaks* devoting their lives to the Hindu nation.¹⁸ This funneling happens through the famed *shakha* system, where *swayamsevaks* regularly meet in neighborhood parks, playgrounds, or fields to conduct both sporting and martial physical exercises and to receive ideological training.

Swayamsevaks advance through a formal bureaucracy if they demonstrate ideological commitment and aptitude. A *swayamsevak* may become an area coordinator (*gatnayak*), rousing local *swayamsevaks* to attend *shakhas*. Following this, he may become a *gan shikshak* or *mukhya shikshak*, both different levels of *shakha* instructor, after which he may become a convenor (*karyavah*). Convenors graduate to convene larger geographic areas: in rural areas *khand* and *tehsil* (small land units), in urban areas *nagar* (city), and then both rural and urban offices merge into district, divisional, subregional, regional, and zone units (*zila*, *vibhag*, *sambhag*, *prant*, and *kshetra*, respectively).

Parallel to this lies the *pracharak* (preacher) trajectory. *Pracharaks* are full-time officials whose official job is to spread the RSS gospel, recruit *swayamsevaks*, and found *shakhas*. Like convenors, *pracharaks* are embedded in geographically coded bureaucratic hierarchies. Thus, the *zila pracharak* is responsible to the *vibhag pracharak*, who is, in turn, responsible to the *kshetra pracharak*. Within the RSS mythology *pracharaks* stand as singularly devoted to the RSS, and as unique embodiments of the values that ordinary *swayamsevaks* should aspire to.

A third stream exists within the RSS but does not require membership as a *swayamsevak*. The office of *sanghchalak*, organized in progressive geographic hierarchies like *karyavaha* and *pracharak*, is offered to sympathetic local notable figures who lend their social and financial capital to the *shakha* or regional division. These *sanghchalaks* tend to be largely symbolic and are primarily intended to co-opt local notables.¹⁹

As *swayamsevaks* move through the RSS bureaucracy, whether through the convenor or *pracharak* stream, they are expected to attend a series of training camps (*sangh shiksha varg*) that, depending on which level, are held locally, at a state level, or at the RSS headquarters in Nagpur. Only those who have completed all three training camps are recommended for senior *pracharak* or convenor positions.

18 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*; Tapan Basu, Pradip Datta, Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, and Sambuddha Sen, *Khaki Shorts, Saffron Flags* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 1993); Seshadri, *RSS*.

19 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 74.

Convenors, *pracharaks*, and *sanghchalaks* in the RSS's vision are all ultimately accountable to the national RSS executive. This executive has three main dimensions. First, there are the six *pramukhs*, or division chiefs, and their deputies, who are responsible for the intellectual, physical, publicity, outreach, organizational, and service-provision activities of the RSS. These *pramukhs* work under the guidance of the joint general secretaries, each responsible for a separate dimension of RSS activity.

The joint general secretaries act under the guidance and direction of the *sarkaryavah* or general secretary. This position, while not the formal head of the RSS, is sometimes considered the most powerful office in the RSS because it is through this office that RSS operational decisions are channeled. The joint general secretaries are informed by the proceedings of the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (All India Representative Assembly, ABPS), composed of representatives from regional RSS divisions and RSS-linked organizations. The ABPS meets once a year and passes a number of resolutions, and is also responsible for electing the *sarkaryavaha*. However, generally, the ABPS acts as a rubber stamp body that carries out the advice of the Akhil Bharatiya Karykari Mandal (All India Executive Council, ABKM), a much smaller executive deliberative body comprising senior *pracharaks*, joint secretaries, and other invited officials. The ABKM is the most directly identifiable executive body in the RSS. Finally, above this entire organizational pyramid sits the *sarsanghchhalak*, or supreme chief. This position, held for life, is granted only by the wishes of the previous *sarsanghchhalak* and is considered to be the philosopher-guide of the entire RSS apparatus.

I outline this entire organizational structure in such detail to make clear one central point: in the RSS's self-presentation, and indeed among many of its critics, the RSS is a cohesive organizational unit with clear bureaucratic links between its multiple divisions that encourage the upward mobility of *swayamsevaks* through the managerial ranks of the RSS. The similarity heuristic embedded in this hierarchy resides in the fact that the *swayamsevak* wears the same uniform as the *sarsanghchhalak*, says the same prayers as the *sarkaryavah*, and performs the same rituals as they do at the ABPS. This similarity heuristic produces the image of a direct link between a *swayamsevak* in a rural *shakha* and the *sarsanghchhalak* in Nagpur. In this understanding the actions of the RSS executive bodies are inseparable from the actions of volunteers in the branch; and the main focus of the RSS is the integrity of the core branch system. The implications of this are clear: if the entire organization is integrated through the similarity heuristics of formal hierarchies, and the RSS declares the *shakha* system is the heart of this, we must assume that the core business of the RSS is making Hindu men. The similarity heuristic behind this assumption is produced by the same uniform worn by RSS workers at all levels, the same prayers, the same routines, and the same ideals. However, this sameness, designed to produce an image of clear organizational boundedness, in which RSS workers wear uniforms and go to *shakhas*, and non-RSS workers do not, elides the fact that separate levels of the RSS do very different work while remaining in the same organizational framework.

Like many organizations, the RSS is fundamentally invested in self-aggrandizement and artificially inflating its power and reach in order to present the most capable and intimidating public-facing image. Like other far-right organizations, the RSS conceals its operational details. There are no public membership records,²⁰ executive meetings are held privately, and financial donations are concealed; broadly speaking, the internal workings of the RSS are characterized by a general atmosphere of secrecy and hermeticism.²¹ Our knowledge of RSS operational structure is entirely predicated on the fragments of information the RSS makes publicly available. Our image of the RSS is built on what the RSS wants us to see. Given that the RSS has a demonstrated penchant for obscurantism, we may assume that its public image is partial, and produced for a reason.

A Dual RSS

I am proposing an alternative understanding of the RSS, in which it is constituted by two functionally separate organizations (figure 1). The first, which I refer to as the cadre RSS, is the RSS that most closely resembles the public image of the RSS—one that revolves around branches, volunteers, uniforms, and route marches. The second, which I refer to as the managerial RSS, is constituted by the RSS executive, which I define as including the *pracharak* system. The managerial RSS is chiefly responsible for the coordination and direction of the vast network of nominally independent RSS organizational appendages. Both the cadre RSS and the managerial RSS share deference to the same leaders—RSS *sarsanghchalaks* and *sarkaryavahs*—but because many RSS-linked organizations also engage in this, shared deference is not compelling evidence of a bounded organizational unity. Below, I define each organizational unit and describe its role and the implications of this division before detailing why this distinction is clear.

20 The occasionally published numbers of *pracharaks* and service provision organizations, and the announcement of *shakha* and *sangh shiksha varg* numbers in the ABPS annual reports, seem to suggest that there are actually significant internal documentation and tabulation efforts, even if the RSS denies it.

21 Abdul Ghafoor Noorani, *The RSS: A Menace to India* (New Delhi: Left Word Books, 2019).

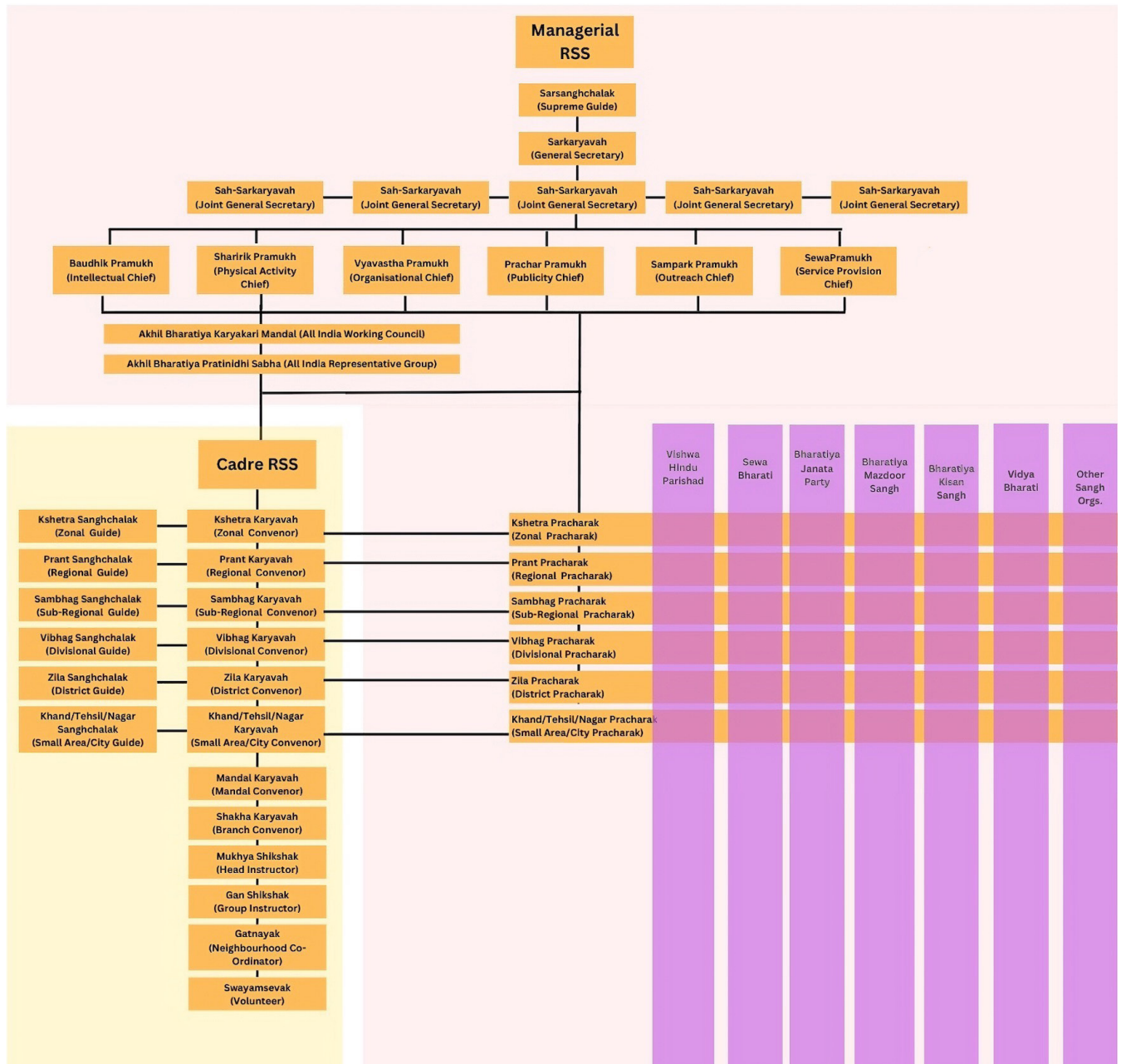


Figure 1. Organizational Chart of the RSS. Source: author's construction.

That the RSS exists in a network of organizations is not a novel observation. Scholars have, for decades, observed that despite the RSS's protestations of independence, the RSS has close networked relationships with its appendage organizations and that these relationships are often negotiated through *pracharaks*.²² Indeed, the ubiquity of the term *sangh parivar* (organizational family of the RSS) indicates that the knowledge of how the RSS exists in a networked relationship with other organizations is widespread.²³ However, in this term there is no real sense of who *exactly* is in the family, what the mechanisms of family growth and coordination actually are (beyond simply *pracharaks*), and what keeps the family together. The term *sangh parivar* then is most useful as a folk moniker that gestures toward some knowledge of RSS networking but requires much more substantiation to be analytically productive.

Importantly, the literature on RSS organizational networks overwhelmingly focuses on a narrow group of organizations—usually just the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP),²⁴ the BJP, and the RSS's student wing, Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students' Council)—for which there are acknowledged relationships.²⁵ With a few significant exceptions,²⁶ dissections of the precise mechanics by which the RSS exerts itself in these organizations are rare. Indeed, debates on the precise balance of power between the BJP and RSS remain common, despite the fact that, as of 2020, 48 percent of BJP MPs are from the RSS (and 71 percent of BJP cabinet members), contradicting any meaningful sense of organizational division.²⁷ It is much more common in the scholarship to find descriptions of these central organizations as coalitions of actors rather than organizational appendages of the RSS. Crucially, while there is a common acknowledgment of a vast network of organizations associated with the RSS beyond the BJP and VHP, the mechanisms of RSS authority and control remain almost unexplored. So, while we have some sense of how large central RSS appendages (notably the VHP and the BJP) relate to the RSS, and we have some sense that there is a large shadowy network of more organizations than we care to identify, the mechanics, boundaries,

22 For example, Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 61; Bruce Graham, *Hindu Nationalism and Indian Politics: The Origins and Development of the Bharatiya Jana Sangh* (New York: Cambridge University Press 1990).

23 For example, Hansen, *Saffron Wave*.

24 This is a religious activist organization that the RSS founded in 1964 and which has been associated with repeated and frequent mass antiminority violence. See Manjari Katju, *Vishva Hindu Parishad and Indian Politics* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2010).

25 See Amrita Basu, *Violent Conjectures in Democratic India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015).

26 For example, Hansen, *Saffron Wave*; Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

27 Neelam Pandey and Shanker Arnimesh, "RSS in Modi Govt in Numbers—3 of 4 Ministers Are Rooted in the Sangh," *The Print*, January 27, 2020, <https://theprint.in/politics/rss-in-modi-govt-in-numbers-3-of-4-ministers-are-rooted-in-the-sangh/353942/>.

and movements of this kind of organization beyond the central network are poorly understood. This article offers a path forward in making covert RSS organizing visible.

The existence of divisions of labor within an organization does not necessarily preclude its singularity. A corporation for example has many internal divisions while remaining a corporation. The singularity of that corporation, and any organization, is usually reducible to its boundedness, its purposiveness, its internal collaboration, and shared deference to agreed-upon mechanisms of authority.²⁸ Certainly, both the cadre and managerial RSS that I propose have a shared purpose, collaborative relationships, and deference to executive RSS hierarchies. However, the problem emerges here when we recognize that so does a whole ecosystem of other organizations.

Other RSS appendages like the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), BJP, Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (Indian Workers' Union), and Sewa Bharati (Indian Service) also share a purpose, extensive collaboration, and shared deference to the RSS executive.²⁹ In this context, are the cadre and managerial RSS any more unified than the managerial RSS is with, for example, the VHP? We might identify denser relations between the two RSSs because the cadre supplies the managerial with personnel, but the cadre RSS also supplies personnel to hundreds of other RSS appendage organizations. Within this network, the organizational boundaries are incredibly permeable. Either we must recognize that the RSS is functionally multiple organizations, or we understand the broader RSS organizational network as a single organization within which there are many internal divisions of labor.

There are strong arguments for both approaches, and the purpose of this article is not to arbitrate between them. My point is, simply, that the boundaries that the Hindu far right claim are firm are, instead, incredibly malleable, flexible, and often counterintuitive, and that these boundaries are intentionally obfuscated by the reliance on a similarity heuristic. As such, I am content here with pointing to the fact that within the RSS there are two separate operational entities with different roles, and the divisions between these entities are intentionally obscured in order to disguise the real work of the RSS.

Cadre RSS

The cadre RSS is not a mystery to us. It is the cadre RSS that scholars and analysts have been scrutinizing for decades and which represents the public face of the RSS. The cadre RSS consists of the *shakha* system and is constituted by *swayamsewaks* and RSS officials responsible for the management of the *shakha* system: for example, the area coordinators and convenors. Above this, there are the *sharirik* (physical) and *baudhik*

28 Ahrne, "Organization outside Organization," 86; David Knoke, *Political Networks: The Structural Perspective* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 86.

29 The Indian Workers' Union is the RSS's labor union umbrella organization. The Indian Service is the RSS's largest service provider umbrella organization.

(intellectual) chiefs, responsible for the coordination of the physical and ideological activities of the branch system, as well as the *akhil bharatiya vyavastha pramukh* (all-India organizational chief) responsible for operational matters of the cadre RSS. Above these there are the two joint general secretaries responsible for the branch system—currently Suresh Soni and Mukund C. R.

At its core, the cadre RSS is the man-making machine promised by the founder of the RSS, Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, in 1925. Its core function is the performance of *shakha* rituals. The importance of these rituals must be unpacked though. Despite the image that the RSS projects, *shakhas* do not usually seriously physically train *swayamsevaks*. While there are cases of the RSS training *swayamsevaks* in the use of weapons more dangerous than the ubiquitous *lathi* (rod), this training does not regularly happen in *shakhas*.³⁰ As violence is increasingly outsourced to network peripheries, *swayamsevak* violence becomes less and less necessary. Indeed, the day-to-day reality of most *shakhas* is that physical training is limited to a series of modest exercises and games that are embedded within an ideological component. The intense ideological training of the *shakha* is also likely overstated. While it is true that the *bauddhik* component in each branch meeting is a form of ideological conditioning, the content of this conditioning is familiar to all *swayamsevaks* from a very early stage. Its repetition each day, in often stultifying addresses, is not designed to impart new knowledge. Most *shakhas* are more likely a dozen or so men in a park in the early morning rather than an intense physical and ideological workout.

So, if the *shakha* is neither seriously physically nor intellectually training *swayamsevaks* on a day-to-day level, what is its purpose? Further, what is the purpose of the cadre RSS? The academic fixation on the transformative conditioning of the *shakha* system is largely drawn from the insights published by Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle in *The Brotherhood in Saffron* (1987). It is from this text (and further texts relying on its insights) that we have concretized the transformative power of the *shakha*.³¹ Here, I want to push back on this assessment of the *shakha* because it produces a vision of the cadre RSS as one of mindless automatons whipped into a blind nationalist fervor. We know that volunteers' membership is actually incredibly messy and mediated by a wide variety of personal, affective, and political factors.³² Many accounts of *shakhas*

30 Bhanwar Meghwanshi, *I Could Not Be a Hindu: The Story of a Dalit in the RSS* (New Delhi: Navayana Publishing, 2020), 147.

31 Importantly, these two authors, upon whose work much study of Hindu nationalism relies, have close ties to the RSS and write decidedly sympathetic accounts. Damle, for example, is a senior official in the Chicago branch of the RSS's overseas division, the Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh. See Dhirendra Jha, "Instead of Offering Objective Analysis, Andersen-Damle Book Helps RSS Perpetuate Convenient Myths," *Scroll.in*, August 20, 2018, <https://scroll.in/article/890987/instead-of-offering-objective-analysis-andersen-damle-book-helps-rss-perpetuate-convenient-myths>.

32 Sudheesh Minni, *Cellars of the Inferno: Confessions of an RSS Pracharak* (Thiruvananthapuram: Chintha Publications, 2016); Meghwanshi, *Could Not Be*; Hemendra Nath Pandit, *The End of a Dream: An Inside View of the RSS Today* (Calcutta: Rabindra Nath Hore, 1950).

have tangentially highlighted the importance of the interpersonal ties they inculcate.³³ Volunteers check up on each other, ensure mutual attendance at the *shakha*, and often share close affectionate bonds of friendship. Drawing on the fragments that these accounts highlight, as well as the observation that the *shakha* is not serious about training, it seems that instead the primary purpose of the cadre RSS is to solidify the social bonds necessary to ensure that there is a permanent collective force able to be mobilized upon the instruction of the managerial RSS. However, this crucial function of the cadre RSS has been de-emphasized in the collective attention paid to the *shakha* system.

The RSS frequently carries the pejorative moniker of a paramilitary militia, a title based on its role in riots during the partition of India. However, since this period, the main function of militarist training in the branch is group bonding.³⁴ This is borne out by the fact that beyond attending a branch, *swayamsevaks* often do little in their capacity as *swayamsevaks* except for occasional mobilizations where they canvas electoral support for the BJP or assist in disaster relief or crisis management.³⁵ As Vinayak Damodar Savarkar famously quipped, “The epigraph for the RSS volunteer will be that he was born, he joined the RSS and he died without accomplishing anything.”³⁶ The limited mobilizations of the RSS require coherent, tight groups of people able to be mobilized, and it is the maintenance of these relationships that is one of the primary purposes of the cadre RSS—keeping the cadre in a constant state of reserve readiness.

The second main role of the cadre RSS is to serve as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS and other RSS-linked organizations. Ex-RSS volunteer and scholar of the Hindu far right, Des Raj Goyal, commented that

the RSS is only a breeding ground for cadres who carry its ideas and attitudes in different fields of life through various specially set up front organizations. The RSS does not draw its cadres from fronts; it only provides cadres who act as conveyers of ideas and controllers of the fronts on behalf of the parent organization.³⁷

33 For example, Curran, *Militant Hinduism*; Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*.

34 Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 46.

35 Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *RSS: A View to the Inside* (New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2018); Malini Bhattacharjee, *Disaster Relief and the RSS: Resurrecting “Religion” through Humanitarianism* (New Delhi: Sage, 2019); Sagar, “How the RSS Co-opted Local Administrations for Its Relief Interventions During the COVID-19 Lockdown,” *The Caravan*, July 10, 2020, <https://caravanmagazine.in/politics/rss-coronavirus-lockdown-ngos-relief-work-sewa-hindu-rashtra>.

36 Quoted in Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 12.

37 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 7.

A key element of the RSS upward mobility structure—through which branch attendees can be funneled into appendage organizations—is the series of *sangh shiksha varg*, or training camps, through which the RSS upskills volunteers who have demonstrated exceptional commitment to the organization. To become a convenor or *pracharak* requires a relatively intense level of devotion to the RSS, and this level of devotion is one only properly assessed and honed through a thorough training process. These camps, which increase in difficulty and selectiveness depending on which level a *swayamsevak* is at, effectively weed out those less able, less committed, or less useful. There is no way to identify these officials without the bureaucratic structure offered by a dedicated organizational branch. Many of these officials go on to become *pracharaks*, officials whose work is not centered around the *shakha* but is rather devoted to coordinating the activities of RSS-linked organizations in a given area. *Pracharaks* constitute the iron frame,³⁸ or the nervous system,³⁹ of the RSS network. However, few of them work in a branch. Instead, they work in RSS-appendage organizations where, on behalf of the RSS, they “rule by proxy,”⁴⁰ often by utilizing the authority of the position of *sanghatan mantri*, or organizational secretary. Despite emerging from the branch system, the central work of *pracharaks* is not in the branch.⁴¹ They move on to bigger work. Accordingly, the second main role of the cadre RSS is to act as a recruitment pool for the managerial RSS by testing the commitment and capabilities of volunteers.

The final main role of the branch is the collection of donations. On the Sangh festival of Guru Dakshina, volunteers and branch attendees make anonymous financial donations to the RSS. The RSS does not reveal the amount of money it receives through Guru Dakshina donations, and it is unclear how much of this money, if any, is retained in the branch. What is clear is that these tax-free donations are a significant source of income for the RSS, particularly considering that the RSS has a strong volunteer base in business, financial, and industrial communities across India. By one *ex-pracharak*'s estimate, the RSS in Gujarat alone delivers approximately \$33 million yearly in Guru Dakshina donations.⁴² Considering that the minimal costs of holding a branch meeting—almost always a short outdoor affair on public land—are borne by local volunteers, the vast amount of money collected by the branch system likely goes to other activities.

38 Curran, *Militant Hinduism*, 55.

39 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 24.

40 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

41 Indeed, the critical accounts of RSS defectors provide a glimpse into the RSS's internal dynamics that suggests *pracharaks* move in more rarefied circles that do not require any form of solidarity or social connection with ordinary *swayamsevaks*. See, for example, Meghwanshi, *Could Not Be*, 18.

42 Minni, *Cellars of the Inferno*, 107.

Managerial RSS

More mysterious than the cadre RSS is the managerial RSS. The managerial RSS is an organization that consists of what we might call the RSS executive, whose principal responsibility is the coordination and direction of the RSS's broader organizational network. Broadly, those members of the RSS whose main responsibilities do not lie in the branch system are within the managerial RSS. By this I mean the *pracharaks*, *pramukhs*, and *sah pramukhs* (with the exception of the *baudhik*, *sharirik*, and *vyavastha pramukhs*), the *sarkaryavah* and his five *sah sarkaryavahas*,⁴³ and the *sarsanghchalak*. The role of the managerial RSS only becomes apparent once the RSS's relationship with its appendage organizations is clear.

Recent work challenges the prevailing view that the RSS guides a loosely affiliated network of organizations.⁴⁴ Building on this, I suggest that the RSS retains the capacity for the exertion of authority without coercion through institutionalized communication channels that allow it the capacity to choreograph the activity of thousands of organizations. This is not to say that the RSS, on a day-to-day basis, inserts itself into the affairs of peripheral organizations within its network. It is instead to say that the RSS exerts large amounts of energy in building the institutional communication channels—deputed officials, formal and informal linkages, shared offices, provision of funds, and so forth—that allows the RSS, if the need arises, to mobilize organizations within the RSS organizational network. This proclivity to ensure and stabilize institutional communication channels is visible in large conclaves where RSS appendage organizations report their activities (like *sewa sangams*); in smaller private inter-organizational meetings (like *samanvaya baithaks*) where the RSS coordinates appendage activities; in official liaison positions like that between the RSS and the BJP (currently held by *pracharak* Arun Kumar); and in an RSS tendency to involve itself in appendage affairs to ensure loyalists remain at the helm (as it did with the manufactured removal of Pravin Togadia from the VHP).

The maintenance of this infrastructure of linkages is the glue that binds the broader Hindu nationalist movement and the Indian far right. It is what makes the funding of peripheral service provision organizations relevant to the RSS. It is why BJP policies cannot be understood separately from RSS influence. It is why small hostels for indigenous students in rural Assam send children to RSS schools in Uttar Pradesh. The maintenance of these linkages and the exercise of authority that flows through them—almost entirely separate from branch organizing—is the primary work of the managerial RSS.

43 At the time of writing these were Krishna Gopal, Manmohan Vaidya, Mukunda C. R., Arun Kumar, and Ram Dutt Chakradhar.

44 Felix Pal, "The Shape of the Sangh: Rethinking Hindu Nationalist Organizational Ties," *Contemporary South Asia* 31 (2023): 133–43.

The core unit of the managerial RSS is the *pracharak*. *Pracharaks* are the base-level executive officials of the RSS, authorized through their training, ideological commitment, and conditioning to make decisions on behalf of the RSS in RSS appendage organizations. *Pracharaks* are those RSS members who have completed the entire training camp process and work as full-time volunteers for the RSS, eschewing marriage and family ties for the duration of their service. These *pracharaks* are trained through the central RSS, but upon becoming full-fledged *pracharaks*, they are deputed out to various RSS appendage organizations to maintain and consolidate RSS control over the network. *Pracharak* organizing work is centered on the network of RSS-linked organizations, rather than on the *shakha* system itself. The *pracharak* system acts as the nerve system of the Hindu right.⁴⁵ *Pracharaks* often take up the position of organizational secretary (*sanghatan mantri*) in the organizations to which they are deputed, allowing them to control the logistical and financial decisions of RSS appendage organizations. The *pracharak* is, at an appendage level, an RSS enforcer, making decisions as the RSS in the appendages and ensuring compliance. Accordingly, we might consider *pracharaks* not simply as particularly devoted officials but as the mobile executive centers of RSS authority throughout its organizational network, bringing central executive RSS authority into its organizational peripheries. When *pracharaks* are reconsidered as executive officials of the managerial RSS, then their presence in non-RSS organizations reflects the presence of the RSS far beyond the gates of Nagpur. What this means is that there are elements of the RSS that do not stop at the boundaries of the branch system, implying two separate organizational divisions and perhaps even two separate organizations: the cadre and the managerial RSS.⁴⁶ However, because the officials that constitute this mobile executive are embedded in, and emerged from, the same bureaucratic structure as cadre RSS volunteers, the fundamental division between the work of the *shakha* and that of *pracharaks* is obscured by a similarity heuristic.

The most impactful work of the organizational network that the RSS exerts authority over is not conducted by volunteers in the branch system. While the branch system still socializes and organizes volunteers, who mobilize in emergencies, the bread and butter of the Indian far right now lies outside the branch. The grind of the Indian far right, and its most significant victories and campaigns, happen among the RSS's appendages. More important than the branch is the development of Hindu nationalist policies by the BJP, the rewriting of textbooks by the Akhil Bharatiya Itihas Sankalan Yojana (All India Scheme for History Collation),⁴⁷ the conditioning of Adivasi and Dalit youth

45 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 24.

46 This is not to say that, in some circumstances, ordinary *swayamsevaks* do not function as managerial RSS representatives in organizations where there is no *pracharak* available. These *swayamsevaks* often serve as a conduit for RSS authority.

47 One of the RSS's organizations advocating for educational reform.

in hostels run by Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram (Tribal Welfare Community),⁴⁸ the violence committed by militias like the Hindu Raksha Sena, or the service provision of Sewa Bharati's hundreds of affiliate organizations. The work conducted by these organizations need not see the presence of a single volunteer, but this does not mean that they do not exist within the ambit of RSS authority. This is one of the central points of this article: to disassociate the work of the RSS from the work of its rank and file *swayamsevaks*.

Executive authority extends past the RSS via deputed officials in the hundreds of RSS appendage organizations. The RSS executive consists of those officials who possess the authority to make organizational decisions on behalf of the RSS. Deference to these officials means deference to the managerial RSS. The managerial RSS exerts authority over its many appendages, of which the cadre RSS is only one. The most direct tool of this authority is undoubtedly the *pracharak* and *sanghatan mantri* system, whereby the managerial RSS commands by proxy.⁴⁹ However, the *pracharak* embedded in appendage organizations to which he is deputed is only one method of executive management. The managerial RSS also includes ordinary volunteers who are deputed to appendage organizations. These volunteers are sent out in a more ad hoc way, and with less executive autonomy than *pracharaks*. But within smaller appendage organizations they often serve the same function as the *pracharak*: they are the embodied presence of RSS authority and a conduit for communication and commands.⁵⁰ For example, the Shri Guruji Rughalaya, a hospital in Nashik, was founded by *swayamsevaks* without a *pracharak* visible. This hospital clearly exists within the ambit of RSS authority: it is named after RSS leader Madhav Sadashiv Golwalkar's affectionate title; it is run by the Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Vaidyakiya Pratishthan, a medical trust that describes itself as adhering to the philosophy of the RSS; it is funded by the RSS-linked India Development and Relief Fund (an international fundraising organization that directs money to service provision organizations linked to the Sangh in India); and it was inaugurated by RSS *sarsanghchalak* Mohan Bhagwat. Here we see that sometimes *swayamsevaks* may serve as vectors of the managerial RSS.

The managerial RSS also exerts executive authority over its hundreds of appendage organizations through elaborate hierarchies of bureaucratic organizational genealogy. By this, I mean that organizations linked to the RSS are rarely directly founded by the RSS. For example, Acharya Nagarjuna Awasam, an orphanage in Marregudem village in Telangana, is functionally run by Grama Bharati.⁵¹ Grama Bharati in turn is the

48 An RSS organization for activism among indigenous communities.

49 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

50 Arun Anand, *Know about RSS* (New Delhi: Prabhat Prakashan, 2016), 23.

51 Acharya Nagarjuna Awasam, "Join Hands, Serve the Society," Acharya Nagarjuna Residential Hostel for Boys (brochure, n.d.).

rural service wing of the Telangana branch of Sewa Bharati.⁵² This branch is in turn responsible to the national Sewa Bharati, which is responsible in turn to the managerial RSS through the position of *akhil bharatiya sewa pramukh* (all India service chief), currently held by the functional head of Sewa Bharati, Parag Abhyankar. Alternatively, Panchavati is a yoga center in Bangalore. It was founded and is run by Yogashree, a yoga subsidiary of the Hindu Seva Pratishthana.⁵³ The Pratishthana is a service provision organization in Karnataka responsible to Sewa Bharati, which as we established above, is responsible to the RSS. A dynamic of accountability reflected in the fact that Yogashree refers to RSS *pracharak* Ajith Kumar as its guiding spirit.

By heavily linking the mythology of the RSS to the branch system, and manipulating a similarity heuristic that frames non-*shakha* or non-uniformed work as not RSS work, the RSS's work outside the branch becomes obscured. This has resulted in large-scale confusion about the precise nature of the RSS's influence and involvement outside the ranks of the branch. While there is widespread acknowledgment that the RSS does influence many organizations, and there is some acknowledgment of the way that the *pracharak* and organizational secretary (*sanghatan mantri*) systems are used to consolidate control, beyond this we do not really know what the role of the RSS is beyond the branch gates. This has produced an analytic climate where we resort to the language of shadowy, loosely linked organizational networks, despite the fact that RSS presence in hundreds of organizations is relatively easy to find. If the main work of the Hindu nationalist movement lies in activities external to the RSS, why do we focus so much on the RSS branch system? We focus on it because we know that there is some relationship, we just are not clear on what the relationship is, and the aesthetic similarity heuristics of a unitary organization complicate the image of what is actually a number of organizational units that move in very different ways.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence about this organizational cleavage is how extraneous managerial RSS officials are to the branch system, despite a public image that represents them as one and the same. Branches are functionally self-governing systems that require minimal central RSS intervention. Anyone can start a branch provided they have a minimum number of attendees, and after demonstrating consistent branch activity, they receive the auspices of the RSS and a saffron flag to formalize their participation in the RSS. In this process, there is no specific need for the thousands of highly trained and conditioned officials produced through the training camps. Branches are low-cost ventures that can be started without central RSS support and do not need much centralized direction or management except perhaps in the

52 "About Us," Grama Bharati (website), November 18, 2009, <https://gramabharathi.blogspot.com/2009/11/grama-bharati.html>.

53 "About Yogashree," Yogashree (website), accessed October 12, 2023, <https://yogashree.myfreesites.net/about-yogashree>.

collection of funds. In this context, why is the RSS turning over such large numbers through their *sangh shiksha varg* system, in which senior RSS officials are trained?

If we accept the numbers offered by the RSS in their annual ABPS reports, since 2009 9,163 officials have graduated from the final year of these training camps.⁵⁴ The numbers involved in these systems, and their obsolescence in the *shakha* system, point to other managerial roles for these trainees, the most senior of which go on to become *pracharaks*. The system of RSS functionaries' deputation to RSS appendage organizations is well known. Not just *pracharaks* but other senior officials too are sent to other organizations within the network to "ensure that all the frontal organizations have synergy at a broad level."⁵⁵ It is curious that despite the presence of RSS officials outside the *shakha* being well established in academic and popular understandings of the RSS,⁵⁶ the organizational implications of this externality have not been fully explored.

Similarity Heuristics Disguise

There are three immediate implications that emerge from identifying this internal organizational cleavage. The first is that the role of the cadre RSS's volunteers becomes a symbolic aesthetic phenomenon before it is a material one. This is not to suggest that the cadre RSS does not have a material function, or that it does not mobilize; the 2014 election results are testament to their groundwork. It is merely to suggest that the most important hegemony-building work of the RSS lies outside the branch. Former RSS *sarsanghchalak* Madhukar Dattatreya Deoras accelerated the RSS's foundation of proxy organizations. While this had begun before Deoras, it was not until the late 1970s that this diffusion accelerated. What this acceleration meant was that different organizations now took responsibility for key Hindu nationalist activities. The VHP was tasked with mass mobilization during the *ramjanmabhumi* campaign (the mass mobilization for the construction of a Ram temple in Ayodhya on the site of a mosque that was subsequently demolished), the Bajrang Dal (the VHP's militant youth appendage) was in charge of strategic violence, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad was tasked with student mobilization, Sewa Bharati with service provision, and so forth. The result of all this was that much of the work originally done by the branch-based volunteers was now outsourced to the appendage organizations. The management of this outsourcing fell on the head of what I am referring to as the managerial RSS. But if all these tasks are being done by the appendage organizations, what is the role of the cadre RSS's volunteers?

54 "ABPS," Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (website), accessed May 11, 2022, <https://www.rss.org/tagssearch.html?SearchText=ABPS>.

55 Anand, *Know about RSS*, 23.

56 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 23; Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 97; Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 84.

The branch system is no longer the main material manifestation of Indian far-right agendas.

The second implication of the internal RSS organizational cleavage is that the overwhelming focus on the cadre RSS at the expense of the managerial RSS by analysts and observers of Indian Hindu nationalism is misplaced. This misplaced focus distracts from the true center of gravity of the Indian far right. Highlighting the spectacle of the cadre RSS through events like large meetings of volunteers, such as the 2018 Meerut Rashtroday, pulls focus away from its managerial role. The work of the managerial RSS is conducted outside of the RSS itself—in orphanages, hospitals, militias, and publishing houses. It is through this work that the hegemonic aspirations of the RSS are realized, not through the cadre RSS, yet the cadre RSS dominates our collective imagination of the Indian far right's hegemonic aspirations.

The managerial RSS manages activities that are often violent and involve, among other things, corruption and forced proselytization. It also manages more benign activities like service provision. However, even here the RSS has an interest in concealing its external reach. It is imperative for the RSS to create the perception that there is a vast network of organizations aligning themselves with Hindu nationalism in a voluntary, grassroots, spontaneous process, rather than through RSS direction. It is in the RSS's interests to produce an image of a large, loosely linked group of organizations that organically and spontaneously are working for the same lofty goals. It is critical here for the RSS to appear to just be one organization among many, despite the fact that the RSS has its fingers in far more organizational pies than it cares to openly admit.

The final implication of this internal cleavage is that we must reorient our understanding of the RSS's organizational network away from an atomistic organization-by-organization approach and toward a network-centric approach to the Hindu far right that recognizes that the cadre RSS is just one organization that the managerial RSS manages. This change of focus takes into account that the managerial RSS is the center of the Hindu far right, which in turn means that the key question of the Hindu far right is how, exactly, does the RSS manage? How do power, authority, and information flow through this network, and to where? The study of the Indian far-right then becomes a study of organizational linkages, rather than organizational nodes. Understanding the Indian far right primarily as a networked collective opens up far more analytic doors than does a piecemeal approach that investigates it one organization at a time.

The careful RSS crafting of a public image that is tied to the aesthetic performance of organizational coherence has erased the ways in which it is organizationally divided. The presumption of singularity that a similarity heuristic produces for the RSS makes it easy to deny connections to aesthetically separate organizations and makes it difficult for challengers to establish connections between the diffuse organizational nodes of the RSS network.

The level to which similarity heuristics are consciously strategically used is difficult to measure definitively, largely because the internal conscious political strategy of covert organizations is, unsurprisingly, covert. In the case of the RSS, this is complicated by

the fact that the RSS is demonstrably committed to misrepresentations of its actions and beliefs in public.⁵⁷ However, there are a number of key pieces of evidence that suggest that the flexible expansion and contraction of organizational boundaries is used consciously and strategically. First, the RSS has, since its inception, given strategic directions to its volunteers about when and where they should wear its uniforms and declare that they are openly RSS volunteers.⁵⁸ Second, RSS volunteers are deputed to affiliate organizations through which they “rule by proxy,”⁵⁹ while RSS ideologues maintain claims that these affiliates remain autonomous.⁶⁰ Third, RSS volunteers have been shown to engage in criminal activity associated with Hindu nationalist political agendas,⁶¹ but they do so without any identifying RSS paraphernalia, consistent with accusations that RSS volunteers conduct violence in secret.⁶² This secrecy is tied intimately to the public boundary making of who is identifiable as an RSS member and who is not.

The case of the RSS is certainly exceptional in its size and strength but is by no means an isolated case. In much of the world, nativist authoritarians still rely primarily on boots on the ground as their primary mechanism of organizing. While of course contemporary mobilizations like the Taliban (Afghanistan), Ma Ba Tha (Myanmar), Bodu Bala Sena (Sri Lanka), and Kyrgyz Chorolor (Kyrgyzstan) use online technologies and social media, we must remain vigilant to those mobilizations in which the formal offline far-right organization remains crucial. Reappraisals of the RSS have implications for the historical study of other mass far-right mobilizations—whether they be of German National Socialism, the Rwandan National Republican Movement for Democracy and Development, or the civil society networks surrounding Brazilian Bolsonarismo.

There is some evidence that RSS reliance on a similarity heuristic is not unique but rather is a useful illustrative example to discuss the mechanics of far-right obfuscation across the world. For example, in Japan, the reliance of the far-right Nippon Kaigi (Japan Conference) on a similarity heuristic allows its members to discreetly wield enormous influence in the government’s legislative and executive branches.⁶³ By self-identifying as a conservative lobby group, Nippon Kaigi positions itself as an external entity to the Japanese Diet, rather than as an organization with a parliamentary division

57 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*; Noorani, *The RSS*.

58 Kanungo, *RSS Tryst*, 54.

59 Hansen, *Saffron Wave*, 113.

60 Anand, *Know about RSS*, 23.

61 Aishwarya Iyer, “Two Years after Delhi Violence, Riots Accused from RSS-BJP Aim to Be Elected Civic Leaders,” *Scroll.in*, February 22, 2022, <https://scroll.in/article/1017109/two-years-after-delhi-violence-riots-accused-from-rss-bjp-aim-to-be-elected-civic-leaders>.

62 Subhadra Joshi, *RSS: A Secret Para Military Organization* (New Delhi: Indraprashta Press, 1975).

63 Thierry Guthmann and Aike Rots, “Nationalist Circles in Japan Today: The Impossibility of Secularization,” *Japan Review* 30 (2017): 207–25.

with members holding 206 out of 710 Diet seats. In Turkey, the Milliyetçi Hareket Partisi (Nationalist Movement Party, MHP) obscured its involvement in street violence and mass killings by outsourcing these activities to the Grey Wolves. The Grey Wolves continue to function as a paramilitary militia and a supposedly independent organization from the MHP even though they were founded by Alparslan Türkeş, the then leader of the MHP.⁶⁴ Since then the leader of the MHP has functioned as the leader of the Grey Wolves and there is substantial membership crossover between the two. However, a similarity heuristic disguises the mutual embeddedness of these organizations. In Thailand, the far-right paramilitary Red Gaurs operated functionally as a wing of the Internal Security Operations Command (ISOC) of the Thai military and was led by Major General Sudsai Hasdin. However, the similarity heuristic that disguised the mutual constitution of the military and the Red Gaurs allowed the former, as well as the Thai monarchy, to distance themselves from the mass killings conducted by the Red Gaurs in the 1970s.⁶⁵ These examples point to the fact that the phenomenon I describe in the RSS is not simply limited to this network but may have broader resonance in other far-right networks required to navigate between being covert and being claims-making mobilizations.

The spectacle of the Indian far right, insofar as it is represented by the baton-wielding cadre RSS, effectively dazzles analysts at the expense of the more mundane hidden work of bureaucratic management of one of the world's largest far-right organizational networks. A focus on the cadre RSS is something of a red herring that stymies serious analysis of where the executive center of gravity lies in the Hindu nationalist network. I argue that it most certainly is not with the cadre RSS but instead with a more diffuse managerial RSS that extends far beyond the gates of Nagpur. Not all far-right organizations have the same lines of distinction between cadre and managerial operational divisions that the RSS does. However, many far-right organizations use similarity heuristics to promote a public image that obscures those connections and activities they believe to be detrimental to their public image. It is not news that far-right organizations are secretive, but the mechanisms of that secrecy merit greater attention. By pulling apart the precise tactics by which far-right organizational networks conceal themselves, in this case a strategic manipulation of a similarity heuristic, we are better able to grasp, precisely, the extent of these networks, their capabilities, and how best to challenge them.

64 Diliman Abdulkader, "The Ultra-Nationalist Grey Wolves: A Turkish Government Tool to Persecute Kurdish People," *Georgetown Journal of International Affairs* 23 (2022): 92–98.

65 Puangthong Pawakapan, *Infiltrating Society: The Thai Military's Internal Security Affairs* (Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2021).

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Hindu Nationalism and Student Politics

Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad between 1947 and 1985

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Abstract: *Students in India have played politically significant roles both before and since independence. Organizations of both the left and the right attempted and at various points succeeded in mobilizing mass support among students. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) and the front organizations spawned by it, known collectively as the Sangh, have long been major proponents of Hindu nationalism and have considered students important. Despite this, the Sangh's relationship with students has not received systematic analysis. This article, using sources primarily produced by the Sangh, analyzes different aspects of the Sangh's relationship with students between 1947 and 1985. It attempts to demonstrate how during this period, primarily through its student front, the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (All India Students' Council, ABVP), the Sangh was keen on gaining control and influence over student politics. To do so, the ABVP sought to strategically moderate its image. At times the agitational or Hindutva aspects of the organization were foregrounded while on other occasions or even simultaneously the ABVP was portrayed as a peaceful "organization with a difference" that was nonpolitical and interested in service activities.*

Keywords: student politics, RSS, ABVP, Hindu nationalism

This article attempts to understand the relationship that developed from 1947 to 1985 between students and the Hindu nationalist “family” of organizations headed by the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), collectively referred to as the Sangh Parivar (or simply the Sangh),¹ and in particular its student front—the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP), or All India Students' Council. Students, over the last two centuries, have often appeared as visible actors at times of great social and political upheaval, albeit playing starkly different roles. They were, for instance, on both

1 While “Sangh” and “RSS” are commonly used interchangeably, in this article Sangh refers not only to the RSS but the entire collection of organizations of which the RSS is the central authority.

sides of the barricades during the uprisings of 1848,² the most visibly active sections of the unrest of 1968,³ participants in anti-imperialist and anticolonial movements,⁴ and fervent supporters of right-wing movements throughout Europe in the interwar period.⁵ Similarly, in India, students have been important political actors playing multifarious roles since before independence. While students were part of the anti-colonial mass movements and proponents of revolutionary terrorism, they could also be found in the ranks of Hindu and Muslim communalist organizations.⁶ After independence, students continued to play contrasting roles and were a part of the movement against the Internal Emergency,⁷ contributors to violent ultra-left movements,⁸ and an important part of the leadership and support base of the Khalistan⁹ and Assam¹⁰ movements in the 1970s and 1980s. Organizations of both the left and the right attempted and at various points succeeded in securing mass support among students. In the present day, student politics continues to be a keenly contested space with many forces and organizations attempting to intervene.

The genesis of the Hindu nationalist movement in India can be traced to the end of the nineteenth century.¹¹ While there have been numerous individuals and organizations that subscribed to variations of this ideology, in the post-independence period, the Sangh has been its most significant flag bearer. The chief aim of the Sangh's ideological and political project can be summed up as the transformation of India into a Hindu Rashtra (Hindu nation). According to the RSS's second chief and most significant

2 Priscilla Robertson, "Students on the Barricades: Germany and Austria, 1848," *Political Science Quarterly* 84, no. 2 (1969): 367–79.

3 Todd Gitlin, *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987).

4 Philip G. Altbach, "Perspectives on Student Political Activism," *Comparative Education* 25, no. 1 (1989): 97–110.

5 E. J. Hobsbawm, "Intellectuals and the Class Struggle," in *Revolutionaries: Contemporary Essays* (London: Phoenix, 1973), 245–66.

6 Anil Rajimwale, "Student Movement in India in the Nineteenth Century," *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 49 (1988): 343–48; Anil Rajimwale, *History of Student Movement in India: Origins and Development (1920–1947)* (New Delhi: Manak Publications, 2001).

7 An "Internal Emergency" was imposed in India on June 25, 1975, by the president on "advice" of the prime minister, Indira Gandhi. This gave summary powers to the executive, which were utilized in stifling political opposition, the freedom of the press, and individual rights and liberties. See Gyan Prakash, *Emergency Chronicles: Indira Gandhi and Democracy's Turning Point* (New Delhi: Penguin Viking, 2018).

8 Biplab Dasgupta, *The Naxalite Movement* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1974).

9 Hamish Telford, "The Political Economy of Punjab: Creating Space for Sikh Militancy," *Asian Survey* 32, no. 11 (1992): 969–87.

10 Meeta Deka, *Student Movements in Assam* (New Delhi: Vikas Publications, 1996).

11 Jyotirmay Sharma, *Hindutva: Exploring the Idea of Hindu Nationalism* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2011).

ideologue, M. S. Golwalkar (1906–1973), the Hindu nation had always existed and the task was to revive and revitalize it.¹² This was to be done through the development of a unified Hindu identity based on the myth of a shared culture, language, and history of all Hindus while preserving caste hierarchies and simultaneously demonizing the Hindu Nation’s “others”—particularly Muslims, Christians, and communists.¹³ While many different terms have been assigned to it, each with their distinct flavor, in this article the political-ideological project of the Sangh is referred to as Hindutva.

A marginal force in most parts of the country for many decades after independence, the Sangh emerged as an important player on the national political scene in the mid-1980s. It witnessed a meteoric rise both in organizational and electoral terms on the back of successful communal mobilizations,¹⁴ and its electoral front, the Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian People’s Party, BJP), was able to head and run a coalition government from 1999 to 2004. Although voted out of power in 2004, it has since returned to power and remained there ever since.

The BJP coming to power in 2014 as the head of the National Democratic Alliance (NDA) coalition government was accompanied nationally by an uptick in student protests, especially at so-called elite universities.¹⁵ The first major protest was against the appointment of a Sangh functionary, Gajendra Chauhan, as the chairperson of the prestigious Film and Television Institute of India. There were major protests by the students at the institute and a strike that lasted 140 days and received support from students in other parts of the country and also among those in the film industry.¹⁶ Soon after, in October 2015, under the guidance of the central government, the University Grants Commission (UGC) decided to discontinue a financial support program available to MPhil and PhD students at some fifty-odd central universities and “centers of excellence.”¹⁷ Protests dubbed the “Occupy UGC Movement” were initiated by Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) students in Delhi at the offices of the UGC. These spread to other cities, and protests were organized at the UGC’s regional offices in Kolkata, Allahabad, Pune, and

12 Madhav Sadashivrao Golwalkar was the second head of the RSS between 1940 and 1973 and is considered to be its most important ideologue. Shamsul Islam, introduction to *Golwalkar’s We or Our Nationhood Defined*, ed. Shamsul Islam (New Delhi: Pharos, 2017), 14.

13 Pralay Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics: From Hedgewar to Sudarshan* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2017), 127.

14 Here “communalism” is, as commonly understood in the South Asian context, an attempt at constructing religious identities and inciting ill will between different religious “communities.”

15 While it is formally a coalition, the NDA is dominated by the BJP.

16 Aparna Bose, “10 Biggest Students’ Protests in History of Independent India,” *The Indian Wire*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.theindianwire.com/events/biggest-students-protests-in-independent-india-266169/>.

17 The UGC is a statutory body set up in 1956 charged with coordination, determination, and maintenance of standards of higher education in India.

Varanasi.¹⁸ Another large outburst of student protest took place at the University of Hyderabad—this was related to the death by suicide of a Dalit scholar, Rohit Vemula. Leftist and Ambedkarite student organizations held the ABVP, the local MP, and the Ministry of Human Resource Development responsible for Vemula’s death.¹⁹

Close on the heels of these protests, on February 9, 2016, at JNU, the ABVP interrupted an event organized by ultra-left students and groups, claiming that the event was “anti-national” and that anti-India slogans had been chanted. Mobile-camera videos of these protests were circulated on television but were later found to be doctored. The uproar led to the arrest of three leftist student politicians, including the JNU Students’ Union president, Kanhaiya Kumar, with officials’ invoking sections 124A (sedition) and 120B (criminal conspiracy) of the Indian Penal Code.²⁰ The arrests were followed by large-scale protests in the university and on the streets of Delhi, as well as demonstrations of global solidarity.²¹ Student protests against the Sangh’s activities continued into the second term of the BJP—most notably the agitation against the heavily criticized Citizenship (Amendment) Act (CAA) and the National Register of Citizens (NRC).²² Beginning from the major universities in Delhi, the protests spread to other parts of India, and students faced brutal action from the police in both Delhi and Uttar Pradesh (UP).²³

Works on student politics in the colonial period have tended to focus on nationalist, socialist, or revolutionary developments.²⁴ The existence of organizations and political tendencies associated with Hindu and Muslim communalism has been noted only in

18 Kritika Sharma Sebastian, “Occupy UGC’ Stir Spreads across India,” *The Hindu*, November 3, 2015, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Delhi/occupy-ugc-stir-spreads-across-india/article7835175.ece>.

19 Zeeshan Shaikh, “FTII, HCU, JNU, Fergusson, NIT and Now Jadavpur: 6 Protests That Expose Modi Government’s Failure to Understand Students,” *India.com*, May 7, 2016, <https://www.india.com/news/india/ftii-hcu-jnu-fergusson-nit-and-now-jadavpur-6-protests-that-exposes-modi-governments-failure-to-understand-students-1166795/>.

20 Prabir Purkayastha, “Violence against JNU Is an Attack on the Indian Nation,” *NewsClick*, February 18, 2016, <https://www.newsclick.in/india/violence-against-jnu-attack-indian-nation>.

21 “JNU Events Signal Culture of Authoritarian Menace,” *The Hindu*, February 16, 2016, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/‘JNU-events-signal-culture-of-authoritarian-menace’/article14084416.ece?homepage=true>.

22 The CAA, passed in 2019, amended the Indian Citizenship Act to provide an accelerated pathway for citizenship for Hindu, Sikh, Jain, Parsi, Buddhist, and Christian migrants from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, and Pakistan. The amendment is widely criticized for excluding Muslims. The proposed NRC is to be an official record of all legal citizens. To be included on the list, a person would be required to present a specific set of documents.

23 Ali Chougule, “The Changing Face of Student Protests,” *Free Press Journal*, January 20, 2020, <https://www.freepressjournal.in/analysis/the-changing-face-of-student-protests>.

24 Rajimwale, *History of Student Movement*; R. K. Roy, *Scholar Rebels: Gandhian Nationalism and the Emergence of Student Politics in Bengal: 1920–44* (Kolkata: Progressive Publishers, 2013); S. K. Mittal, “The Role of Meerut College in the Freedom Struggle of India,” *Social Scientist* 7, no. 4 (1978): 35–56.

passing,²⁵ and we know very little about their organization, demands, and activities. Although immediately after independence some early literature did mention new trends of “popular nationalism” based on “cow worship, vegetarianism, respect for parents, and caste,” this form of student politics was not the primary focus.²⁶ Even though Philip Altbach and Anil Baran Ray paid somewhat greater attention to the Sangh and the ABVP,²⁷ and supplied important insights regarding the political and communal nature of the ABVP, the period they covered did not extend beyond 1968. A vast literature is devoted to the study of Sangh and Hindu nationalist politics, including works that focus on different aspects of the development of Hindu nationalism in the colonial period,²⁸ on the organization and politics of the RSS,²⁹ on the various constituents of the Sangh,³⁰ on particular regions or states,³¹ and on violent manifestations of the Sangh’s politics.³² However, even within such a wide variety of studies, the Sangh’s student front and the Sangh’s relationship with students remain largely unexplored.

This lack of scholarly focus could be viewed as the success of a strategy, discussed below, of appearing innocuous while still contributing to the Sangh’s development. While the Sangh has been involved in student politics almost since its inception and students have played a role in its survival and development at critical junctures, they have often not been *visible* components of its rise. Therefore, perhaps, students have generated less interest than more immediate causes such as communal rioting. Alongside this, the general tendency to view students and student politics as inherently progressive could also be seen as contributing to the absence of literature on the Sangh and student politics.

25 Philip G. Altbach, “The Transformation of the Indian Student Movement,” *Asian Survey* 6, no. 8 (1966): 448–60; Anil Baran Ray, *Students and Politics in India: The Role of Caste, Language, and Region in an Indian University* (Columbia, MO: South Asia Books, 1978).

26 Joseph Di Bona, “Elite and Mass in Indian Higher Education: The Case of Allahabad University,” in *Turmoil and Transition: Higher Education and Students Politics in India*, ed. Philip G. Altbach (New York: Basic Books, 1969), 317.

27 Philip G. Altbach, “Rightist Swing among Indian Students: The Vidyarthi Parishad and the Indian Student Movement,” *Peace News*, no. 1493 (February 5, 1965); Ray, *Students and Politics in India*, 180.

28 Sharma, *Hindutva*; John Zavos, *The Emergence of Hindu Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).

29 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*; Felix Pal, “Similarity Heuristics in the Indian Far Right: How the RSS Obscures Its Operational Scale,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 79–102, <https://doi.org/10.5070/RW3.246>.

30 Christophe Jaffrelot, ed., *The Sangh Parivar: A Reader* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2005).

31 Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics, 1925 to the 1990s: Strategies of Identity-Building, Implantation and Mobilization (with Special Reference to Central India)* (London: Hurst, 1996).

32 Sumit Sarkar, “The Fascism of the Sangh Parivar,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 28, no. 5 (1993): 163–67.

These speculations could be further substantiated through research focusing on the nature of academic inquiry into the Sangh.

This leaves only one variety of literature on the Sangh and its involvement in student politics—works produced by academics closely involved with the Sangh. Much of this literature blurs into self-portrayal, in which these works uncritically reproduce information from written Sangh sources and interviews with members of the Sangh.³³ In addition, the Sangh has always attempted to present the ABVP in whatever light suits its interests. The “true character” of the ABVP is portrayed as being ungraspable, the organization spoken of as having many facets, being difficult to understand, and impervious to analysis.³⁴

Given the Sangh’s interest in student politics, the paucity of literature on the subject, and contemporary popular understandings, this article inquires into different aspects of the Sangh’s relationship with students between 1947 and 1985. It challenges a simplistic and historically inaccurate understanding of this relationship. I argue that while the anti-student character of the Sangh may be apparent today, the Sangh has historically not dismissed students and student politics as irrelevant. On the contrary, throughout the period under study, students were recognized as politically influential, and the Sangh was interested in gaining student support, establishing its control over the student movement, and orienting it toward Hindutva politics. These attempts to control student politics were not always straightforward and varied in form depending on the context. In elaborating on this, I note the emphasis on the agitational aspects of the ABVP as part of its frequent direct engagement with Hindutva politics. I then focus on the simultaneous attempt to maintain a façade of the ABVP as a peaceful, nonpolitical “organization with a difference” through various means.

Prior to engaging with the Sangh’s involvement in student politics, the importance of organization is discussed. That organizing was a central part of both RSS ideology and its political strategy is clear from the utterances of its leaders and ideologues.³⁵ It is also noted by different studies.³⁶ The RSS was banned on February 4, 1948, five days after Mohandas Gandhi’s assassination. The ban was withdrawn on July 12, 1949, after the RSS adopted a written constitution and agreed to function “openly.” However, the RSS remained a

33 Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle, *The Brotherhood in Saffron: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and Hindu Revivalism* (London: Westview, 1987); Binodinand Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics: A Case Study of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1998).

34 *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh (1949–2009)* [60 years of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad] (Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad, 1999), 27.

35 For example, Balasahab Deoras, *Hindu Sangathan: The Need of the Nation* (New Delhi: Suruchi Sahitya, 1979); M. S. Golwalkar, *From Red Fort Grounds* (New Delhi: Asia Press, 1967).

36 D. R. Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Radha Krishna Prakashan, 1979), 175–76; Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 68.

“semi-secret organisation,”³⁷ and its internal organization, methods of promotion and decision-making, and relationship with its front organizations all continued to be “shrouded in secrecy.”³⁸ Therefore, while recognizing that studies have suitably addressed the question of organization in the RSS,³⁹ some of its basic characteristics and unique features are worth reiterating. The organization of the RSS, the structure of the Sangh, and the ABVP’s position in it are laid out in the first section.

Focusing on the period between 1947 and 1985 requires explanation. Political independence in 1947, the ban on the RSS in 1948, and the establishment of the ABVP in 1948–1949—all of which were significant to the Sangh and its relationship with student politics—make this an appropriate point to commence the analysis. Similarly, certain significant developments around 1985 make it a suitable end point. Among these are the steep rise of communal politics in general and around the Ram Janmabhoomi movement in particular,⁴⁰ as well as the beginnings of economic liberalization under the Rajiv Gandhi government.⁴¹ With respect to student politics, the most significant development was the implementation of the New Education Policy from 1985 onward, which cleared the road for the progressive commercialization of higher education.⁴² Students were confronted with different concerns, questions, and issues that necessarily had an impact on student politics. This article is, therefore, restricted to developing an understanding of the Sangh’s relationship with students in the period prior to these developments.

A quick note on sources: This article is based on fieldwork I conducted during the course of my DPhil. To understand the Sangh’s relationship with students the primary focus is on a variety of documents generated by the Sangh. These are important to understanding the kind of picture the Sangh presents of the ABVP, as well as to exploring the contradictions and inconsistencies in that picture. These include online and offline ABVP publications, especially the ABVP’s versions of its history that were available on the organization’s

37 Aijaz Ahmad, “India: Liberal Democracy and the Extreme Right,” *Indian Cultural Forum* (blog), September 7, 2016, <https://indianculturalforum.in/2016/09/07/india-liberal-democracy-and-the-extreme-right/?fbclid=IwAR3xDQcpP10jtEhrCXau60uoRcCRpikbJyoNroAsEVCTAwui4Fn3hFUPKE>.

38 Aijaz Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present: Ideology and Politics in Contemporary South Asia* (London: Verso, 2000), 171.

39 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*; Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*; Pal, “Similarity Heuristics.”

40 The Ram Janmabhoomi movement was spearheaded by the Sangh from the mid-1980s, through its many affiliates, centered around reclaiming the alleged birthplace of Lord Ram (an important deity in Hinduism) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh. While many lives were lost in the riots that accompanied the movement, the Sangh gained both organizationally and electorally as a result. For more, see A. G. Noorani, ed., *Destruction of the Babri Masjid—A National Dishonour* (New Delhi: Tulika Books, 2015).

41 Venkatesh Athreya, “Some Implications of ‘The New Economic Policy,’” *Social Scientist* 13, no. 7/8 (August 1985): 18–26.

42 Dinesh Mohan, “New Education Policy: Promises, Promises, Promises,” *Economic And Political Weekly* 20, no. 38 (September 1985): 1615–19.

website. Digital and print publications of Sangh affiliates, including the RSS, Bharatiya Jana Sangh (BJS), and Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), as well as writings and speeches of Sangh ideologues such as Golwalkar and Deoras on subjects like the importance of students and organization, were also studied.⁴³ Works produced by academics closely involved with the Sangh, such as Walter Andersen and Shridhar Damle on the RSS,⁴⁴ or Binodinand Jha on the ABVP,⁴⁵ are read in the same manner as other published Sangh sources. It was, however, not possible to get access to either RSS or ABVP records despite multiple attempts. This can be attributed to both the Sangh's penchant for opacity and the generally poor archival practices of student organizations in India. Therefore, the English-language organ of the RSS, *Organiser*, was thoroughly examined for the period between 1947 and 1993. This magazine contains a wealth of material, with numerous editorials, opinion pieces, and articles written by important Sangh functionaries belonging to various Sangh affiliates. Some pieces were, or at least claimed to have been, authored by ABVP officeholders of the time.

Organization

RSS and Sangh

The RSS is hierarchically organized, with the *shakha* (branch) being the smallest fundamental unit. The *shakha* has its own internal hierarchical structure and includes under a hundred male Hindu members called *swayamsevaks* (volunteers).⁴⁶ It congregates daily under the RSS flag, and following the RSS prayer there are physical exercises, marches and drills, and sermons on “problems affecting the national life.”⁴⁷ The *shakha* is supposed to act as a training and recruiting ground, inculcating RSS ideology as well as cultivating a sense of brotherhood among *swayamsevaks*.⁴⁸ Formally, above the *shaka* are *samitis* (committees) organized broadly in terms of geographic scope from the *mandal* (local) to the *prant* (state) level, each consisting of representatives from *samitis* below them. At the all-India level is the Akhil Bharatiya Pratinidhi Sabha (ABPS), which consists of delegates chosen by the states. Although the ABPS is constitutionally the top-most body of the RSS, real power rests in the hands of the Central Working Committee.⁴⁹ In terms of individual leadership positions, the *sarsanghchalak*, while

43 Madhukar Dattatraya Deoras, also known as Balasaheb Deoras, followed Golwalkar as the head of the RSS in 1973 and continued in that position until 1994.

44 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*.

45 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*.

46 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 68.

47 M. S. Golwalkar, *Bunch of Thoughts* (Bangalore: Vikrama Prakashan, 1966), 333–34.

48 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 176.

49 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 74.

constitutionally given a nominal position as the “the guide and philosopher” of the RSS,⁵⁰ sits atop the RSS hierarchy and is the “real lord and master of the entire network.”⁵¹ The *sarsanghchhalak* is not elected but is chosen by the previous one and remains in the position until his death. Below him is the *sarkaryavah*, the “*sarsanghchhalak*-in-waiting.”⁵² At all other levels of the RSS’s organization there are the positions of *sanghchhalak* and *karyavah*. Although occupants of the former have complete authority under the RSS constitution,⁵³ they are “ornamental figureheads,” and the latter exercise power within the organization.⁵⁴ While these positions are formally open for elections, as Pralay Kanungo notes, even if conducted, in the RSS setup, elections are meant to be neither free nor democratic.⁵⁵

A major condition for lifting the ban placed on it after Gandhi’s assassination was that the RSS stay limited to the “cultural” field. Accordingly, its written constitution stated that “the Sangh, as such, has no politics and is devoted purely to cultural work.”⁵⁶ Despite this, the RSS remained present in Indian politics through the establishment of a network of front organizations—now also known collectively as the Sangh. Padmaja Nair calls these organizations the “sectoral affiliates” that make up a crucial component of the RSS’s influence, “provide a foothold for the RSS in critical sectors,” and become means of “promoting the core agenda of the Hindu Rashtra.”⁵⁷ Prior to independence, only the RSS and an organization of women supervised by it, the Rashtra Sevika Samiti, existed.⁵⁸ After independence, the first three major organizational projections of the RSS were the ABVP (focused on students), the BJS (focused on parliament), and the Bharatiya Mazdoor Sangh (focused on trade unions), all formed between 1949 and 1955. Over time many important organizations targeting different sectors were established. Shamsul Islam has cited an RSS publication that lists as many as forty organizations created by the RSS.⁵⁹ It was because of these “sectoral affiliates” and the

50 RSS constitution, article 12, reproduced in Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 210.

51 Goyal, 184.

52 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 75.

53 RSS constitution, article 16, reproduced in Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 212.

54 Kanungo, *RSS’s Tryst with Politics*, 75.

55 Kanungo, 74–75.

56 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 207.

57 Padmaja Nair, “Religious Political Parties and Their Welfare Work: Relations between the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party and the Vidya Bharati Schools in India,” Working Paper No. 37 (Religions and Development Research Programme, University of Birmingham, 2009), 38.

58 Tanika Sarkar, “Heroic Women, Mother Goddesses,” in *Women and Right-Wing Movements: Indian Experience*, ed. Tanika Sarkar and Urvashi Butalia (New Delhi: Zed Books, 1995), 184.

59 Shamsul Islam, *RSS Primer Based on Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh Documents* (New Delhi: Pharos, 2014), 38.

RSS's overarching control over them that, as D. R. Goyal puts it, the RSS was "nothing if not political."⁶⁰

The RSS generates full-time activists, *pracharaks*, who are dedicated to expanding the organizational reach of the Sangh and are the "kingpins" of the Sangh's organizational network.⁶¹ According to the RSS constitution *pracharaks* are full-time workers who receive no remuneration and whose "mission is to serve the society."⁶² Although not mandatory, they are usually unmarried. The *pracharaks* have their independent hierarchical order; there are no elections, and they are selected by *pracharaks* above them. They are also responsible only to the higher-level *pracharak* and not to local *shakha* officers,⁶³ making them "a communication network outside the 'constitutional' system."⁶⁴

Pracharaks, in working with affiliates, form the key link for the expansion of the RSS through front organizations as well as a means of exercising authority over them. When a new organization is required to be formed, "a suitable pracharak is detailed for it."⁶⁵ In already existing organizations, *pracharaks* occupy key posts such as general secretary and organizing secretary, while the ceremonial ones are reserved for trusted sympathizers and notables. Also, *pracharaks* working with front organizations are responsible to their superior *pracharaks* and not the organization with which they are connected. It is, as Kanungo concludes, by manning crucial organizational positions of various affiliates "with its committed pracharaks" that the "RSS ensures organizational harmony and coordination."⁶⁶

Being controlled by the RSS in this manner, the different Sangh affiliates cannot be viewed as functioning independently. As Aijaz Ahmad has argued, there is no "fundamental political difference among the fronts of the RSS"; there is simply "a division of labor within a cluster of fraternal groupings" and the distinction among the fronts is not "real" but "merely procedural."⁶⁷ At the same time, the RSS is not a "simple cohesive organization" but, having established the Sangh, a "well-integrated system of organizations."⁶⁸ Being organizationally enmeshed in this way, there can be a transfer of political gains between different affiliates of the Sangh. Gains made in any component

60 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 186.

61 Goyal, 182.

62 RSS constitution, article 17, reproduced in Goyal, 212–13.

63 Goyal, 182–83.

64 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 79.

65 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 184.

66 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 84–85.

67 Ahmad, *Lineages of the Present*, 288–89.

68 Kanungo, *RSS's Tryst with Politics*, 85.

of the political-organizational network can be devoted to accruing gains in another.⁶⁹ An illustration of this is the contribution of the Sangh's service and social welfare affiliates such as Seva Bharti and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram. These allowed the Sangh to first make inroads into constituencies that were inimical to it and then to convert the gains made by these affiliates into electoral success for the parliamentary front.⁷⁰

ABVP

The ABVP (All India Students' Council) has its own organizational pyramid, from a branch at a single educational institution up to the central council, each with its own general and executive councils. The latter, consisting of a few nominated members at each level of the organization, hold the real decision-making power. In terms of leadership, the president and secretary are elected by the general councils, while the office bearers such as the vice president, joint secretary, and treasurer are appointed by the president. However, in much the same manner as other Sangh affiliates, the RSS has a stranglehold on the ABVP's organization. At the all-India level the senior organization is "heavily RSS."⁷¹ Further, the office of organizing secretary at each level in the organizational hierarchy, "the most powerful [position] in the organization," is reserved for *pracharaks*.⁷² It is the all-India organizing secretary, an RSS *pracharak*, with a "central team" serving as an "extra-constitutional body" that decides all important policy matters. At lower levels of the hierarchy, RSS *pracharaks* similarly orchestrate the organization's activities from the position of organizing secretary.⁷³

While the ABVP identifies as "primarily a student organization," it is "open to all sections of the educational community."⁷⁴ According to the ABVP constitution, in addition to all students over the age of twelve, who are eligible to be members, all nonstudents interested in the "educational problems of the country and in the welfare of students" can also become "associate members" of the organization.⁷⁵ As a result, members and workers of the ABVP include "students, teachers as well as educationists."⁷⁶ What is worth noting is that not only are teachers included as members but they

69 Aparna Mahiyaria, "Right Wing and Street-Theatre: From Censure to Co-Option," *Studies in Theatre and Performance* 41, no. 3 (2021): 305–20.

70 Tariq Thachil, "Embedded Mobilization: Non-State Service Provision as Electoral Strategy in India," *World Politics* 63, no. 3 (2011): 434–69.

71 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 123.

72 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 37.

73 Jha, 38.

74 Satish Marathe, "Vidyarthi Parishad Stands for 'Lokniti' and Not 'Rajniti,'" *Organiser*, July 11, 1977.

75 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 36.

76 O. P. Kohli, "ABVP—Potent Force for Social Change," *Organiser*, July 20, 1974.

also have a permanent position in the organizational structure of the ABVP. While RSS *pracharaks* occupy the posts of general secretary and organizing secretary, the offices of president and vice president at all levels of the organization are frequently occupied by teachers so as to “guide” students, although this is not constitutionally mandated.⁷⁷ Thus, during the period under study, Bal Apte and O. P. Kohli, both university teachers and important RSS functionaries, were all-India presidents of the ABVP.⁷⁸

Finally, being a part of the wider Sangh, the primary task of the ABVP, just as any other Sangh affiliate, is not organizational expansion for its own sake but furthering the Sangh’s political project. Apart from contributing by mobilizing participation in the initiatives or agitations of other Sangh affiliates, the highest priority of the ABVP is that of “indoctrination” by “exposing” students to the Sangh’s ideology.⁷⁹ By doing so it organizationally connects what the Sangh considers to be an important section of the population to its politics while also creating new bearers for that political project. At the same time, being a part of the Sangh’s organizational network, the ABVP has access to organizational, financial, mobilizational, and ideological resources of the entire Sangh.

Agitational and Hindutva Politics

Agitational-Political Feint

Since very early on, students were considered important by the Sangh. They were, those close to the Sangh have asserted, among the “first members of the RSS,” which the organization used to “recruit other adherents” and “to establish RSS units outside Nagpur.”⁸⁰ Neutral observers have noted a strong element of student support for the RSS following its foundation. Seen as a foil to Muslim separatism, the RSS was encouraged by Hindu nationalists within the Indian National Congress to conduct its activities at Benares Hindu University (BHU) and was allotted a building within the campus in 1938, providing it with a foothold to influence students as well as participate in university politics.⁸¹ From the end of the Quit India Movement (circa

77 “ABVP Leader Held under MISA Freed by Allahabad High Court,” *Organiser*, March 29, 1975; Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 37–38.

78 “Student Leaders Warn Indian Govt.,” *Organiser*, September 28, 1974; “Vidyarthi Parishad Puts Up Massive Show of Student Power,” *Organiser*, November 23, 1974.

79 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 120.

80 Andersen and Damle, 117–18. The RSS was founded at Nagpur in 1925.

81 Ray, *Students and Politics in India*.

1944) till around the time of independence students close to the RSS were active in the All India Students' Congress.⁸²

The ABVP was formed in the context of the ban placed on the RSS in 1948. Those close to the Sangh suggest that with no way of carrying out its activities, the RSS turned to its student members.⁸³ Guided by *pracharaks*, "front groups" consisting of students were established on campuses. Soon after, these groups, primarily located in northern India and Bombay, were brought together to form the ABVP. While there is a certain lack of clarity among Sangh sources regarding the foundation date of the ABVP, it would be safe to conclude that the ABVP was formed at some point between 1948 and 1949.⁸⁴ In conditions where RSS activities were banned, the ABVP was thus originally conceptualized as a "substitute for the shakha."⁸⁵ After the ban was lifted, the ABVP remained a full-scale organizational projection of the Sangh into the student domain.

Following independence, students' importance was recognized by the then *sar-sanghchalak*, M. S. Golwalkar, which is clear from his writings on the subject. Even while being consistently critical of contemporary student politics and viewing students as swept away by "destructive revolutionary forces" and indulging in "constant agitation," Golwalkar insisted that to call students "disruptive" (*updand*) was not only "wrong but also not productive."⁸⁶ For him the "real problem" was to convert students into "virtuous citizens for great social construction."⁸⁷ It was the ABVP, functioning within the university, that was to be the vehicle of change for students. Its role would be to guide the students away from "all forms of anti-nationalism" and "constant agitation."⁸⁸ The ABVP was to "inculcate values and knowledge" in

82 Philip G. Altbach, *Student Politics in Bombay* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1968). The All India Students' Congress was an umbrella student organization with students of various ideologies participating.

83 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 117–19.

84 For 1948 as the foundation year, see "History: Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad," ABVP (official website), accessed March 23, 2018, <http://abvp.org/history>; "ABVP Since 1949," ABVP (official website), accessed March 18, 2018, <https://www.abvp.org/ABVP/Since-1949>. For 1949, see "Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches," *Organiser*, March 9, 1974; Raj Kumar Bhatia, "Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad," *Organiser*, May 4, 1974; *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*.

85 Goyal, *Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh*, 104.

86 Adheesh Kumar, ed., *Shri Gurujii Aur Yuva* [Gurujii and youth], n.d., 14. This is a small booklet in Hindi in which a Sangh functionary has compiled letters and other writings of Golwalkar on youth and students. No publisher or date of publication is given, but a copy can be downloaded from Archives of RSS: <https://www.archivesofrss.org/GurujiiBooks.aspx>.

87 Kumar, 19.

88 Kumar, 14–15, 18.

students and extend the work of the Sangh by increasing *shakhas*.⁸⁹

Despite this, not a great deal can be found in either contemporary or later Sangh sources about the activities of the ABVP between its founding and the mid-1960s. This can perhaps be attributed to the fact that most activities of the ABVP in its first decade were local and “lacked an [a]ll-India character.”⁹⁰ Toward the end of the 1960s a drastic shift in ABVP policy and activities led to a narrative that sought to create the impression that the main activities of the ABVP were “constructive” and that the ABVP “tended to avoid campus politics and student protests.”⁹¹ According to this narrative, it was only sometime after 1965 that the ABVP took the decision to participate in student politics and union elections.⁹² This assertion, repeated ad nauseum, is a fundamental part of the Sangh’s version of the ABVP’s history.⁹³ The reality, however, seems to be somewhat different.

Without explicitly publicizing their involvement, the ABVP and the Sangh all the while remained involved in politics. From an ABVP source we know that the organization’s first demands were that the country be called Bharat, the national anthem be the “Vande Matram,” and Hindi be the “link language” (*sampark bhasha*).⁹⁴ All of these were political demands discussed in the Constituent Assembly at the time.⁹⁵ Further, studies have noted how RSS student sympathizers participated in gheraos and protests, and how RSS-backed candidates contested elections at Allahabad University after independence.⁹⁶ Additionally, the ABVP was involved in rioting in multiple cities during this time, including in Jabalpur (1960),⁹⁷ Aligarh (1961),⁹⁸ and Allahabad (1963),⁹⁹ as well as in series of protests at BHU in the 1950s and 60s.¹⁰⁰ Even from this cursory ac-

89 Kumar, 18.

90 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 46.

91 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 119.

92 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections,” *Organiser*, June 18, 1978.

93 “ABVP Major Events,” ABVP (official website), accessed March 23, 2018, <http://abvp.org/major-events>.

94 *Akshil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*, 10.

95 Granville Austin, *The Indian Constitution: Cornerstone of a Nation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1966).

96 Di Bona, “Elite and Mass.” In India, a “gherao” is a protest where workers prevent managers or employers from leaving the workplace until their demands are met.

97 Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

98 Joseph Di Bona, “Indiscipline and Student Leadership in an Indian University,” *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 2 (1966): 306–19; Jaffrelot, *Hindu Nationalist Movement*.

99 Di Bona, “Indiscipline and Student Leadership.”

100 Ray, *Students and Politics in India*.

count, it is clear that the ABVP had never not participated in politics. The organization's involvement seems to have been either actively concealed or not highlighted. The official decision to participate in agitations and elections was, therefore, not as much of a radical alteration of policy as Sangh sources would have one believe.¹⁰¹

The shift that did occur was a tactical one, most likely a response to conditions that developed in student politics of the time. There was an upsurge in student protests over poor living conditions and academic issues,¹⁰² as well as student involvement in wider politics through, for instance, the Naxal Movement and the student agitation in Orissa.¹⁰³ Under these conditions, in a bid to remain relevant and not lose ground to emerging groups, the earlier policy of not acknowledging the ABVP's involvement in student politics was abandoned and instead one finds an emphasis on student participation in wider politics alongside more direct and publicized interventions by the ABVP.¹⁰⁴

The ABVP, from 1969 onward, began to issue statements in support of demands for a greater role for students in university administration.¹⁰⁵ It also began to openly participate in students' union elections. Nevertheless, the assertion in the *Organiser* that the ABVP was a "dominant factor" in student elections across the country by 1978 is an exaggeration.¹⁰⁶ The ABVP did, however, manage to win a significant number of elections, particularly in northern India. Among these were elections at Rajasthan University,¹⁰⁷ BHU,¹⁰⁸ Lucknow University,¹⁰⁹ many colleges across UP,¹¹⁰ and at Delhi University (DU) on multiple occasions,¹¹¹ which, given its location in the national capital, was politically important.

There was also emphasis on the agitational aspects of the ABVP. It was projected as an organization that had a national presence and would take up issues of "national"

101 Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 119.

102 Surajit Mazumdar, "The Post-Independence History of Student Movements in India and the Ongoing Protests," *Postcolonial Studies* 22, no. 1 (2019): 16–29.

103 See Dasgupta, *Naxalite Movement*, and *Report of the Commission of Enquiry Orissa Students' Agitation in 1964* (Home Department, Government of Orissa, 1966).

104 That the ABVP's official change in position was guided by this is to an extent even recognized by Andersen and Damle, *Brotherhood in Saffron*, 118–19.

105 "Vidyarthi Parishad Complains to Education Minister VKRV Rao against Vice-Chancellor Raj," *Organiser*, August 8, 1970; "Mighty Meet of Vidyarthi Parishad," *Organiser*, November 15, 1969.

106 "ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections."

107 "Vidyarthi Parishad Leads in Rajasthan," *Organiser*, October 26, 1974.

108 "BHU Must Be Rid of Violence and Goondaism," *Organiser*, June 5, 1971.

109 "Lucknow University Union Elects Vidyarthi Parishad Men as President & Secretary," *Organiser*, September 20, 1969.

110 "Vidyarthi Parishad Captures 110 Students' Unions in U.P.," *Organiser*, February 2, 1974.

111 "The Importance of Delhi University Elections," *Organiser*, September 8, 1973.

interest. To that end, soon after the change of policy an all-India student march was organized at Delhi in September 1970. A report in *Organiser* claimed over five thousand students, including many from outside Delhi, participated. According to this report, students marched through central Delhi and a thirty-member delegation submitted a National Charter of Demands to the vice president of India. A signature campaign, in which over two hundred thousand signatures were collected, was claimed to have been carried out on a national scale.¹¹² The charter, which included demands for a common civil code for all citizens, manufacture of an atomic bomb, and regaining lost territories occupied by enemy countries,¹¹³ aided the projection of the ABVP as an organization with “national interests.” The successful organization of the march was utilized to further build the image of the ABVP as the largest student organization in the country—one that not only fought for the interests of students but also had concerns that were related to national and international politics.¹¹⁴

At the same time, leaders of the Sangh and the ABVP also began to advocate for a more active, political role for students. Slogans such as “Students are not citizens of tomorrow but of today” (*Chatr kal ka nahi aapitu aaj ka nagrik hai*) and “Student Power Nation’s Power” (*Chhatra Shakti Rashtra Shakti*) were coined.¹¹⁵ Terms like “social transformation,” “revolutionary process of social change,” and “restoration of democracy” came to be frequently used to imply that the Sangh was not only amenable to student participation in politics but encouraged it. At its Silver Jubilee Conference in 1974, the all-India vice president of the ABVP, Bal Apte, reportedly called upon students, referred to as “educated youth citizens,” to “participate in the revolutionary process of social change.”¹¹⁶ He asserted that organized students would “grow into a potent force for social change and smash the corrupt and anti-social elements.” Therefore, “the slogan for the new-era” was to be “Student Power—Nation’s Power.”¹¹⁷ Writing as the all-India president of the ABVP, O. P. Kohli made the same point in more or less the same words, asserting that educated young citizens had “a significant part to play in the revolutionary process of social change.”¹¹⁸ An editorial in *Organiser*, following the Navnirman agitation (see below), noted the participation of students, calling this a “fresh breeze,” and stated that the involvement of students in politics should be wel-

112 “246,900 College Students Demand Right to Work and Vote at 18,” *Organiser*, September 26, 1976.

113 “Poster of ABVP’s Chalo Delhi: Students’ Grand March to Rashtrapati Bhavan,” September 1970, U. No. 0086718, X/1/1970/Office of the GS,38, Gujarat State Archives, Gandhinagar, India.

114 “Chhatra Shakti,” *Organiser*, November 16, 1974.

115 *Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad 60 Varsh*, 11.

116 “‘Student Power Is Nation’s Power’—Prof. Bal Apte,” *Organiser*, July 27, 1974.

117 “Student Power.”

118 Kohli, “ABVP.”

comed.¹¹⁹ Another piece in *Organiser* urged students to “intervene in politics” and “save democracy,” as students were the ones who retained “some idealism and a freshness of outlook.”¹²⁰ Sangh leaders like Atal Bihari Vajpayee explicitly encouraged students to get involved in politics with statements like “academic career and politics are not water-tight compartments” and “even if you try to remain aloof from politics, politics will not allow you to do so.”¹²¹ This continued after the Emergency of 1975, as Satish Marathe, all-India joint-secretary of the ABVP, wrote in *Organiser* in 1977 that students were to be the “vanguard of social transformation.”¹²² The ABVP executive in the same year “emphasised the importance of mobilization of student power for all round transformation of the society.”¹²³ And the 1979 ABVP Conference resolved that it was “student power” that had “a great role to play” in the “strengthening of democratic institutions.”¹²⁴

The narrative of the ABVP as playing a leading role in three major movements of the 1970s—the Navnirman agitation, the Bihar agitation, and the struggle against the Emergency—was also forcefully championed. The Navnirman agitation in Gujarat began in January 1974 with student protests in Ahmedabad and escalated into a widespread agitation that resulted in the resignation of Gujarat’s chief minister and later the dissolution of the state legislative assembly. While the Navnirman agitation was ongoing, students in Bihar protesting political corruption began to demand the end of the government. With Jay Prakash Narayan providing leadership, the movement developed in the following months into one against the sitting prime minister, Indira Gandhi. On June 25, 1975, when the Internal Emergency that gave far-reaching powers to the executive was imposed, many important opposition leaders were detained almost immediately. Both the Navnirman and Bihar agitations were said to have contributed to this.¹²⁵ What followed was close to two years of abuse of power, in which the government clamped down on political opposition with arrests and persecution, violations of civil liberties, and muzzling of the press across the country.

The Sangh took up the task of emphasizing the ABVP’s role in the Navnirman and Bihar agitations even while the one in Bihar was in its early stages. In July 1974, O. P. Kohli proclaimed the “prominent role” that the ABVP had played in Gujarat and was

119 “The Gujarat Revolution,” *Organiser*, March 16, 1974.

120 Vashitha, “Student Power Can Break the Vicious Circle,” *Organiser*, August 3, 1974.

121 “Atal Bihari Addresses Bombay Youth Rally,” *About Us*, September 25, 1970.

122 Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

123 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics, Work for Total Revolution,” *Organiser*, June 13, 1977.

124 “Vidyarthi Parishad Launches ‘Lok Abhiyan’ to Educate the Voter,” *Organiser*, December 16, 1979.

125 J. C. Shah, *Shah Commission of Inquiry: Interim Report I* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1978).

continuing to play in Bihar,¹²⁶ while an *Organiser* editorial claimed that the ABVP “was at the vanguard” of both agitations.¹²⁷ This continued after the Emergency with the executive council of the ABVP passing a resolution that “recalled the active role played by the ABVP” in these movements.¹²⁸ With respect to the Emergency, the ABVP was similarly presented as having “spearheaded the students’ movement . . . leading to the fall of the Emergency regime.”¹²⁹ The organization was said to have worked “under different names” and “enlightened the educational community at large” of the “evil machinations of the coterie in power.”¹³⁰ Individuals belonging to the ABVP were claimed to have been “lone voice(s) of protest,”¹³¹ and it was alleged that “hair-raising atrocities” were committed against them.¹³² Such language attempted to create the impression that the ABVP was by far the most active, and sometimes the only, student organization resisting the Emergency.

While the true extent and nature of the ABVP’s involvement in these movements is debatable, this question is beyond the scope of my investigation here. What is significant, however, is that the Sangh had gone from denying that the ABVP played any role in politics to amplifying and greatly exaggerating its agitational aspects and its involvement in the most important political movements of the time. As discussed below, care was taken at the same time not to overplay this agitational-political feint.

Hindutva

There were also numerous occasions on which the Hindutva politics of the ABVP came to be foregrounded. Apart from the communal rioting, of which the ABVP was a part, we find the organization taking up other familiar issues of Sangh propaganda. Among these was the demand for a Uniform Civil Code (UCC),¹³³ which was a constant since at least the time the ABVP came out with its charter of demands in 1970. It was particularly active in taking up the matter of the UCC in the aftermath of the Shah Bano Supreme Court case (1985), which resulted in legislation regarded as discriminating against Muslim women.¹³⁴ The ABVP accused the government and “Muslim groups”

126 Kohli, “ABVP.”

127 “Chhatra Shakti.”

128 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

129 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections.”

130 Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

131 Aryabhata, “Emergency Reign of Terror in Delhi University,” *Organiser*, July 4, 1977, 7.

132 Vipra, “Sacrifices That Tired out the Emergency Regime,” *Organiser*, June 4, 1977, 11–12.

133 For more on the UCC, see Peter Ronald Desouza, “Politics of the Uniform Civil Code in India,” *Economic and Political Weekly* 50, no. 48 (November 28, 2015): 50–58.

134 For the Shah Bano case, see Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Shah Bano Controversy* (New Delhi: Orient, 1987).

of attempting to “whip up communal frenzy” in the name of Muslim Personal Law and demanded the implementation of a UCC as the only lasting solution.¹³⁵ Similarly, the trope of “Bangladeshi Muslim infiltrators” became a consistent mobilizational issue from the late 1970s. Thus, while supporting the Assam agitation, the ABVP claimed that the agitation was “neither communal nor anti-Bengali, nor secessionist but only against foreign infiltration.” Yet it simultaneously stated that it could not be helped if the “infiltrators” were “mostly Bengali speaking Muslims,” and if Muslims were leading a counter-agitation with the blessings of the ruling party.¹³⁶ Muslim infiltration was used by the ABVP to mobilize in states such as Bihar,¹³⁷ Tripura, Rajasthan, and Gujarat,¹³⁸ as well as in cities with a significant Muslim presence such as Hyderabad.¹³⁹

The ABVP also linked Urdu to Muslims and protested against promotion of the language. For instance, when the UP state government decided in 1981 to recognize Urdu as a second official state language, the ABVP, claiming that “the poor people of UP” would have to “bear the burden of financing” the change, led an agitation against it.¹⁴⁰ At the same time, it made allegations that portrayed the UP government, the police, and Muslims as being allied on the issue against the peaceful protestors. Communal feelings were intended to be whipped up in this manner. There is a long history of Hindi and Urdu being co-opted by cultural nationalists, both Hindu and Muslim, to create polarization in northern India.¹⁴¹ By associating Urdu with Muslims in protesting the recognition of Urdu as a state language, the ABVP was agitating against what the Hindu right calls “minority appeasement.”

The ABVP was also a consistent critic of minority institutions—Christian and Muslim—and the special status accorded to them under the Indian Constitution. Its All India Conference of 1980 warned against “the monopoly of foreign missionaries on the system of education in the tribal areas” and called on “student power to mobilize tribal opinion” against it.¹⁴² Similarly, the ABVP’s 1985 conference “cautioned against the Christian communal activities.”¹⁴³ A regular focus of ire was Aligarh Muslim University,

135 “New Education Policy Must Tackle Problems of Illiteracy, Poverty and Unemployment—ABVP,” *Organiser*, November 24, 1985.

136 “ABVP for Constitutional Solution of Foreigners Issue,” *Organiser*, June 1, 1980.

137 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Re-Enter Union Elections,” *Organiser*, June 19, 1982.

138 Jha, *Student Organizations and Politics*, 48–53.

139 “Foreign Transmitter in Osmania University,” *Organiser*, May 12, 1985.

140 “ABVP Opposes Urdu Imposition on UP,” *Organiser*, January 27, 1981.

141 Alok Rai, *Hindi Nationalism* (Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2001).

142 “ABVP to Work for Harijans, Tribals . . .,” *Organiser*, November 16, 1980.

143 “New Education Policy Must Tackle Problems.”

which was called, among other things, “All Muslim No University,”¹⁴⁴ “Mini Pakistan,”¹⁴⁵ and “a den of communalism and a hotbed of intrigues and conspiracies.”¹⁴⁶ At times Muslim students and faculty of the university were accused of inciting riots and violence to get rid of Hindu students.¹⁴⁷ Not limiting its criticism to specific universities, in 1985 the national executive of the ABVP demanded a reconsideration of “the whole question of minority institutions” to curb their “separatist character.”¹⁴⁸

There was thus a strategic promotion of the political-agitational aspects of the organization as well as the foregrounding of Hindutva demands. The propensity of the ABVP to alternate between the extremism noted above and moderation, which is explored in the next section, is not unique to the organization but is consistent with that of other parts of the Sangh, including the RSS.¹⁴⁹

“Organization with a Difference”

Alongside the promotion of Hindutva and its agitational-political aspects, there was the attempt to project the ABVP as an “organization with a difference”—one that was “nonpolitical” and that conducted constructive service activities.

A Nonpolitical Organization

Despite the ABVP’s forays into various forms of politics there were simultaneous proclamations of reluctance toward indulging in *rajniti*.¹⁵⁰ It was asserted that “all the evils [in education]” had their “roots in politics,” and that “delinking of politics and education” was a must.¹⁵¹ This meant opposition to the “involvement of students in politics.”¹⁵² Even when the ABVP was actively projected as an important part of the agitations mentioned in the previous section, or following the Emergency when it openly “appealed” to “youth and student communities to work for the victory of the Janata Party,” a

144 “Aligarh Is All Muslim and No University,” *Organiser*, August 28, 1969.

145 “Aligarh Muslim University Very Much Needs to Be Indianised,” *Organiser*, April 18, 1970.

146 “The Agean Stables of Aligarh University Must Be Cleared,” *Organiser*, May 29, 1971.

147 “Aligarh Muslim University Is Playing Politics with Riots,” *Organiser*, December 10, 1978; “AMU’s Involvement in Recent Violence,” *Organiser*, May 20, 1979.

148 “ABVP’s Call for Withdrawal of Gujarat Agitation,” *Organiser*, June 26, 1985.

149 Shamsul Islam, *Hindu Nationalism and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh* (New Delhi: Media House, 2017), 88.

150 *Rajniti* is frequently used to refer to electoral politics but can also be derisively used to mean “politicking.” Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad.”

151 B. K. Kelkar, “Revive the National Education Movement,” *Organiser*, December 29, 1985.

152 “ABVP Warns of Explosive Situation in Education Field,” *Organiser*, June 21, 1981.

nonpolitical image was projected.¹⁵³ It was repeatedly emphasized that the organization was not interested in “power politics.”¹⁵⁴

At the level of student politics, in attempting to appear nonpolitical there were periods during which the ABVP officially did not participate in union elections. This was the case for the first decade and a half of the ABVP’s existence, and after the formation of the Janata Party government in 1977. In May 1978, the ABVP’s executive council decided to withdraw from elections for the “timebeing [*sic*].” The stated reason was that “demands of the present situation in the educational field” made it “imperative for the ABVP to take initiative” and “free the educational sphere from partisan politics.”¹⁵⁵ The ABVP continued officially to not participate in union elections till the policy was formally reversed in 1982. In reversing the policy, the ABVP claimed that it had withdrawn from elections to “set our house in order and strengthen the inner vitality of the organization,” and that now it had proved that a student organization could “work and continue to grow, even when it ignores the union elections.”¹⁵⁶

On closer scrutiny, however, the ABVP’s claim of staying aloof from elections cannot be taken at face value. Even while its activists had been officially prohibited from taking part in electoral activities, ways were found to circumvent this. This was through front organizations owing allegiance to the Sangh that were formed to contest elections, and which disappeared soon after. An example of this was Janata Vidyarthi Morcha (JVM) at DU, which in the absence of the ABVP contested elections at DU from 1978 onward. It was described by *Organiser* as “the student wing of the BJP,”¹⁵⁷ leaving little doubt as to its affiliation. When the ABVP formally returned to the electoral fold, it contested together with the JVM for a short period before the JVM disappeared.¹⁵⁸ At Himachal Pradesh University, its method was not to contest but to “give support to good independent candidates,”¹⁵⁹ who more often than not would be close to the Sangh. Moreover, in 1981 the ABVP at its national executive meeting altered its policy regarding union activities. Its members were encouraged “as students” to “influence the election process and the activities of the student unions,” thus creating further opportunities for intervention without a formal policy of participation in elections.¹⁶⁰

153 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

154 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Shun Power Politics.”

155 “ABVP to Keep Clear of Union Elections.”

156 “Vidyarthi Parishad to Re-Enter Union Elections.”

157 “Why JVM Men Swept Delhi University,” *Organiser*, September 6, 1981, 1.

158 “ABVP-JVM Alliance Sweeps DUSU Polls,” *Organiser*, September 26, 1982, 2.

159 “ABVP Teaches Reds a Lesson in Simla,” *Organiser*, September 13, 1981, 5.

160 “ABVP Warns of Explosive Situation.”

During times that the ABVP did openly contest elections, the halo of being nonpolitical was still sought and participation in the electoral process was couched in terms of being a necessary compromise for the benefit of the student community. It contested elections “to prevent the forces of anarchy from capturing the unions” and to provide the “right type of leadership” so that the problems of the university could be solved “with [a] constructive approach.”¹⁶¹ Other student organizations were supposed to only be interested in power while the ABVP would use students’ unions “to shape the national destiny on the basis of youthful aspirations in the best traditions of India’s culture and civilization.”¹⁶²

Further, involvement in wider politics in varying capacities came to be justified through the idea of “national reconstruction.” The ABVP had, it was asserted, unlike other student organizations, a “distinct personality”: it was “national in character.”¹⁶³ The argument was that post-independence nationalism required one to be involved in “national reconstruction,”¹⁶⁴ and that that was the ABVP’s goal. While the ABVP repeatedly emphasized this,¹⁶⁵ its meaning was left vague. A contemporary source, for instance, defined it as “reconstructing different aspects of our national life with a view to enabling the country [to] reach the highest point of glory.”¹⁶⁶ Later on, “National Reconstruction” was said to be “nothing but the social transformation and that is awakening the spirit of National Consciousness, Nation first attitude, unconditional love for the motherland ‘Bharat’ and self-respect among the people.”¹⁶⁷ Being so ill-defined, national reconstruction could include a variety of ABVP activities, and all sorts of politics came to be justified as attempts toward a nonpolitical “national reconstruction.”

Moreover, while other student organizations were alleged to have been “launched as fronts of certain political parties”¹⁶⁸ and were “mere shadows of their political bosses,”¹⁶⁹ the ABVP, it was claimed, was “an independent student body engaged in helping students.”¹⁷⁰ That the ABVP maintained a “strict aloofness from any political party affiliation” was

161 Kohli, “ABVP.”

162 “Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad.”

163 Kohli, “ABVP.”

164 Kohli.

165 E.g., Marathe, “Vidyarthi Parishad”; “Student Power”; Eknath Ranade, “Challenge before the Youth,” *Organiser*, January 4, 1975.

166 Kohli, “ABVP.”

167 “Hum Hai ABVP” [We Are ABVP], ABVP (official site), accessed April 4, 2022, <https://www.abvp.org/ABVP/Hum-ABVP-hain>.

168 “Chhatra Shakti.”

169 “Vidyarthi Parishad Training Students as ‘Citizens of Today,’” *Organiser*, April 9, 1974.

170 “Vidyarthi Parishad Training Students.”

routinely asserted despite its clear organizational links with the Sangh.¹⁷¹ Accusations of being the student wing of the BJS (1951–1977) were rebuffed by claiming that although the two “agreed on many matters,” this was “more in the nature of agreement on perceived truth in national affairs than on *any organizational link-up*.”¹⁷² How, it was rhetorically asked, could the ABVP, “an independent and autonomous organization of students” that was “started independently,” indeed “years before,” possibly be a student wing of the BJS?¹⁷³ During the Janata period, with the party constituent of the Sangh having merged with the Janata Party, the ABVP maintained its unaffiliated appearance by not formally joining a Janata-aligned student or youth organization, asserting that it would not be a part of “any front or platform which will directly or indirectly work as a wing of any political party.”¹⁷⁴ Following the formation of the BJP (1980), in much the same manner as it did with respect to the BJS, the ABVP continued to assert that it was not a student wing of the party.¹⁷⁵

It must be noted that while the ABVP was never officially a student wing of a political party—and it is necessary that this distinction be understood—claims that distance the ABVP from party politics must also be recognized as disingenuous. In the context of the Sangh Parivar’s organizational structure, the fact that the ABVP was not directly affiliated with either the BJS or the BJP is of little significance. With the RSS at the top of the Sangh hierarchy, it was through the leadership of the RSS that the different affiliates were closely linked organizationally. The ABVP was, therefore, very much a partisan organization.

The Role of Service Activities

In claiming that the ABVP was an organization with a difference, there was an emphasis on its “constructive” approach and its organization of “nonpolitical” programs and activities.¹⁷⁶ These included initiatives and schemes of financial or other forms of aid to students, such as fellowship centers,¹⁷⁷ book and scientific equipment banks,¹⁷⁸ reading rooms,¹⁷⁹ free

171 Kohli, “ABVP.”

172 “Chhatra Shakti.” Emphasis added.

173 “Chhatra Shakti.”

174 Rajat Sharma, “Janata Should Desist from Direct Involvement in Students Movement,” *Organiser*, April 6, 1979.

175 Kanchan Srivastava, “Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad Is Not the Students’ Wing of BJP: Shreehari Borikar,” *DNA*, November 6, 2014, <https://www.dnaindia.com/mumbai/interview-akhil-bharatiya-vidyarthi-parishad-is-not-the-students-wing-of-bjp-shreehari-borikar-2032512>.

176 “Well Done ABVP,” *Organiser*, June 25, 1978.

177 “Silver Jubilee Year of Vidyarthi Parishad.”

178 Kohli, “ABVP.”

179 “ABVP Observes Dr. Ambedkar’s Punyatithi as ‘Samata Divas,’” *Organiser*, December 28, 1980.

coaching, hostels,¹⁸⁰ and conducting entrepreneur workshops.¹⁸¹ There were felicitations for “first class first students,”¹⁸² as well as music, debate, and painting competitions held at educational institutions.¹⁸³ Additionally, there were programs that involved students as volunteers, such as “Students for Rural Reconstruction.” This was a “national project” that began in 1977, in which students would go to “backward villages, urban slums, Harijan bustees and tribal areas,” first to study “these peoples’ problems” and then to “help solve” them.¹⁸⁴ Student volunteers were also mobilized for relief work in areas affected by natural calamities.¹⁸⁵ Finally, in the arsenal of service activities was a program launched in 1966 by the ABVP called the Student Experience in Interstate Living—“a unique venture for promoting . . . integration among youths from different states.”¹⁸⁶ As a part of this program, students from northeastern states lived with families in different parts of the rest of India for a year.

It has not been uncommon for Sangh affiliates to utilize such “service” or “welfare” activities to their advantage. Golwalkar articulated the concept of “Positive Hinduism” after the RSS was implicated in Gandhi’s assassination. This “enhanced the position of seva (service) as an organizational priority of the RSS,” and through service activities the Sangh sought to “rehabilitate the RSS and its affiliates in the eyes of India’s politicians and people.”¹⁸⁷ Studies have also focused on service-oriented affiliates like Seva Bharti, Vidya Bharti, and Vanvasi Kalyan Ashram, which provide basic education, health care, and other forms of aid to people and in areas that other Sangh affiliates have been unsuccessful in reaching and that have often been ignored by the state. They have assisted the Sangh in expanding its sphere of influence and in bringing it electoral success.¹⁸⁸

Similarly, service activities in the context of the ABVP were not simply used to bolster its image as an organization with a difference carrying out nonpolitical, constructive work,

180 “Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches.”

181 Eknath Ranade, “Vidyarthi Parishad Holds Entrepreneurs Workshop,” *Organiser*, January 19, 1978.

182 “Morarji Desai Marvels at Vidyarthi Parishad’s Discipline,” *Organiser*, January 7, 1970; “Chhatra Shakti”; Kohli, “ABVP.”

183 “ABVP Curtain-Raiser for International Youth Year,” *Organiser*, January 13, 1984.

184 “New Vidyarthi Parishad Project: Students for Rural Reconstruction,” *Organiser*, November 12, 1977.

185 “Vidyarthi Parishad Has 600 Branches”; Ravindra Pawar, “Vidyarthi Parishad Boys Fight Drought in Maharashtra,” *Organiser*, April 28, 1973.

186 “Vidyarthi Parishad ‘My Home Is India’ Meet Makes History in Gauhati,” *Organiser*, January 15, 1978.

187 Gwilym Beckerlegge, “Saffron and Seva: The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh’s Appropriation of Swami Vivekananda,” in *Hinduism in Public and Private: Reform, Hindutva, Gender and Sampraday*, ed. Antony Copley (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), 31–65, at 49.

188 Christophe Jaffrelot, “Hindu Nationalism and the Social Welfare Strategy,” in Jaffrelot, *Sangh Parivar*, 211–24; Thachil, “Embedded Mobilization.”

but also to attract students to the organization. Aparna Mahiyaria has explained how in the absence of the possibility of recruiting students directly to its more extreme demands and often violent methods, service activities allowed for an engagement with a wider student constituency and brought them into the ABVP's and the Sangh's organizational reach.¹⁸⁹

Conclusion

This article has tried to demonstrate, firstly, that far from having an inherent animosity toward students, the Sangh, during the period under study and primarily through the ABVP, was keen on gaining control and influence over student politics. Secondly, in pursuit of this goal, the ABVP sought to strategically moderate its image. At times the agitational or Hindutva aspects of the organization were foregrounded, while on other occasions or even simultaneously, it was portrayed as a peaceful "organization with a difference" that was nonpolitical and interested primarily in service activities. The success of this image meant that the ABVP grew exponentially in the 1970s and by the mid-1980s was one of the largest student organizations in India.

Finally, within the literature, students have frequently been assumed to be inherently progressive, left-wing,¹⁹⁰ anti-status quo,¹⁹¹ oppositional,¹⁹² and anti-establishment.¹⁹³ Historically, however, as different works have recognized, this has not been the case. In East Asia, students ran the "gamut from stridently socialist to right-wing, religiously identified, ethnicist, and more."¹⁹⁴ In Germany by 1931, even before the Nazis came to power, the right enjoyed majorities in student councils in most German universities. The German Students' Union was the first national organization that fell to the Nazis.¹⁹⁵ Conservative religious movements also played an important role in Pakistan from the 1970s onward, where a significant number of students were attracted to Islamic revivalist movements.¹⁹⁶

189 Mahiyaria, "Right Wing and Street-Theatre."

190 Seymour Martin Lipset, "Editorial," *Comparative Education Review* 10, no. 2 (1966): 129–31; Seymour Martin Lipset, *Rebellion in the University* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1972); B. Zewde, *The Quest for Socialist Utopia: The Ethiopian Student Movement, 1960–1974* (Woodbridge: James Currey, 2014).

191 Lipset, *Rebellion in the University*.

192 M. Burawoy, "Consciousness and Contradiction: A Study of Student Protest in Zambia," *British Journal of Sociology* 27, no. 1 (1976): 78–98; E. Aspinall and M. L. Weiss, "Understanding Student Activism," in *Student Activism in Asia: Between Protest and Powerlessness*, ed. M. L. Weiss and E. Aspinall (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), 1–32; M. E. Boren, *Student Resistance: A History of the Unruly Subject* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

193 Philip G. Altbach, "Student Politics in the Third World," *Higher Education* 13, no. 6 (1984): 635–55; E. Shils, "Indian Students: Sadhus Rather than Philistines," *Encounter* 17, no. 3 (1961): 16.

194 Aspinall and Weiss, "Understanding Student Activism," 19.

195 Geoffrey J. Giles, *Students and National Socialism in Germany* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1985).

196 Matthew J. Nelson, "Embracing the Ummah: Student Politics beyond State Power in Pakistan," *Modern Asian Studies* 45, no. 3 (2011): 565–96.

Similarly, in Egypt, students were prominent supporters of the Muslim Brotherhood immediately after World War II.¹⁹⁷

The characterization of students as having an inherent predilection for certain political tendencies has had an influence on the literature on student politics. As Edward Aspinall and Meredith Weiss self-critically note, works on student politics “may tend to privilege comparatively radical and/or leftist” movements.¹⁹⁸ However, there do exist important—in some cases, classic—studies on right-wing student politics. In the German context, we have the works of Geoffrey Giles,¹⁹⁹ whose focus is particularly on Nazi student politics; Michael Steinberg,²⁰⁰ who traces the history of German student politics from the student fraternities of the nineteenth century to the Nazi takeover; and Willibald Karl and Wolfgang Zorn,²⁰¹ who compare student politics of the 1960s and 1970s with those of the Weimar years. These are in addition to studies of “white collar fundamentalism” in Nigeria,²⁰² of anti-communist students in Indonesia,²⁰³ of fascist groups in Italian universities,²⁰⁴ and of pan-Islamist student organizations in Pakistan,²⁰⁵ to name only a few. This article, as a study of a popular right-wing student organization and of student politics that was frequently pro-status quo, is an addition to this corpus and challenges the widely held notion of an inherently progressive student politics.

197 Altbach, “Student Politics in the Third World,” 649.

198 Aspinall and Weiss, “Understanding Student Activism,” 19.

199 Geoffrey J. Giles, “University Government in Nazi Germany: Hamburg,” *Minerva* 16, no. 2 (1978): 196–221; Giles, *Students and National Socialism*.

200 Michael Stephen Steinberg, *Sabers and Brown Shirts: The German Students' Path to National Socialism, 1918–1935* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

201 W. Karl, “Students and the Youth Movement in Germany: Attempt at a Structural Comparison,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 1 (1970): 113–27; Wolfgang Zorn, “Student Politics in the Weimar Republic,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 5, no. 1 (1970): 128–43.

202 E. Obadare, “White-Collar Fundamentalism: Interrogating Youth Religiosity on Nigerian University Campuses,” *Journal of Modern African Studies* 45, no. 4 (2007): 517–37.

203 S. Sapiie, “Student Activism and Strategic Identity: The Anti-Communist Student Action Front (KAMI) in West Java, Indonesia, 1965–1966,” in *The Third World in the Global 1960s*, ed. S. Christiansen and Z. A. Scarlett (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2013), 182–97.

204 Luca La Rovere, “Fascist Groups in Italian Universities: An Organization at the Service of the Totalitarian State,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 34, no. 3 (1999): 457–75.

205 Nelson, “Embracing the Ummah”; Iqbal Haider Butt, *Revisiting Student Politics in Pakistan* (Gujranwala, Pakistan: BARGAD, 2009).

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Global Influence of the Contemporary American Far Right

A Case Study of Serbia

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Abstract: *The process of globalization in recent years has ignited an unprecedented level of far-right transatlantic cooperation. Individuals and members of organizations from the United States traveled to Europe intending to establish permanent relations with their ideological cousins, while new ways of online communication enabled extreme right-wing organizations to share ideas and methods of political activism and learn from each other. This phenomenon is observable in Serbia even though bilateral relations with the United States are troubled by the US-led NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999. For this reason, anti-American feelings developed among many Serbs, with the far right taking the most uncompromising attitude. Nevertheless, the American far right has inspired and influenced right-wing and even mainstream political organizations in Serbia. The first part of this article examines how extreme right-wing groups in Serbia became exposed to American far-right ideas over the Internet. It also shows how more recent connections have been established between the Serbian far right and alt-right figures from the United States. The second part will examine the effect of the populist right-wing movement created by Donald Trump on Serbian mainstream politics. Trump's non-interventionism in his first term awakened optimism that better relations between Serbia and the United States are possible while influencing Serbian narratives, ideology, and political practice.*

Keywords: Serbia, Stormfront, US far right, deep state, Donald Trump

The fall of communism in the late 1980s opened the countries of eastern and central Europe to the West. Societies that had spent the last four decades under the repressive rule of communist parties and nomenklatura soon found themselves exposed to political, economic, and cultural exchange with former ideological archenemies. The far right was among those in the West interested in this newly opened and somewhat exotic region. In the Cold War era, some left-wing Western intellectuals felt alienated from their own communities and traveled to communist countries abroad in search of a political formula for a more equitable state and society.¹ What was once a rather

1 Paul Hollander, *Political Pilgrims: Western Intellectuals in Search of the Good Society* (London: Routledge, 2017), 129.

left-wing practice caused by dissatisfaction with internal political and social structures became a rather right-wing phenomenon in the twenty-first century.

Some American conservatives, deeply unhappy with the current political, social, and cultural condition of the United States, developed a profound interest in the illiberal, socially conservative, ethnically nationalist, and anti-immigration political regimes of eastern and central Europe. People like Pat Buchanan and Tucker Carlson had previously praised the likes of Vladimir Putin and Viktor Orbán while simultaneously criticizing their own governments. In 2013, Buchanan asked whether Putin is an American-style paleoconservative, whose defense of traditional values speaks for most of mankind.² More recently, in February 2024, Tucker Carlson interviewed Putin in the Kremlin, spent a day shopping in Moscow, and famously concluded that the Russian capital is “nicer than any city in the United States.”³ According to Buchanan and Carlson, America should redefine its liberal values, with strongman-run countries such as Russia and Hungary serving as bright examples of what societies unspoiled by globalization and liberalism look like.⁴

On the other side of the Atlantic, far-right figures in eastern and central Europe find appeal in the current conservative movement in the United States and its right-wing populism personified in Donald Trump. The outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States encouraged prominent far-right figures in Europe to adopt Trump’s slogans and style, the narrative of popular struggle against corrupted elites, and the belief that they can win elections against all odds.⁵ In the eyes of the European far right, Trump’s victory in 2016 proved that the political trajectory that led to the establishment of liberal democracies is not irreversible and that there is much that right-wing organizations can learn from each other. The capacity of the American far right to inspire and influence is observable in contemporary Serbia. Far-right parties, and even some mainstream parties, have developed fond sentiments toward Trump’s “America First” ideology and his conservative message. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 as well as the US recognition of Kosovo’s independence contributed to the development of resentment toward the United States among the Serbian people.⁶ The emergence of Donald Trump, however, helped ease those feelings and awakened optimism, at least in

2 Patrick Buchanan, “Is Putin One of Us?,” *Creators Syndicate*, December 17, 2013, <https://www.creators.com/read/pat-buchanan/12/13/is-putin-one-of-us>.

3 Dominick Mastrangelo, “Tucker Carlson: Moscow ‘So Much Nicer than Any City in My Country,’” *The Hill*, February 13, 2024, <https://thehill.com/homenews/media/4465352-tucker-carlson-moscow-putin/>.

4 Anne Applebaum, “The False Romance of Russia,” *Atlantic*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/false-romance-russia/603433/>.

5 Thorsten Wojczewski, “The International Cooperation of the Populist Radical Right: Building Counter-Hegemony in International Relations,” *International Relations* (2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/00471178231222888>.

6 Maja Bjelos, Vuk Vuksanovic, and Luka Steric, *Many Faces of Serbian Foreign Policy: Public Opinion and Geopolitical Balancing* (Belgrade: Belgrade Centre for Security Policy, 2020).

part of the Serbian public and among some political elites, that better relations with the United States are possible.

The influence of the American far right in Serbia, ranging from populists to political extremists, is the focus of this article. I make two key claims. First, I explain how the mainstreaming of the American far right represented in the person and in the electoral success of Donald Trump influenced public opinion, political behavior, and narratives in Serbia. Second, I argue that American extremist organizations have had a noticeable influence on similar groups in Serbia since the early 2000s through Internet communication on extremist websites, on forums such as Stormfront, and more recently, via personal connections. I establish these claims in four steps. In the first section, I define the far right in general and in the United States and Serbia in particular. The next section is dedicated to the right-wing extremist organizations in Serbia that were the first to be influenced online by the American far right. This group is composed of underground, often subcultural, and violent organizations that are not interested in or capable of participating in Serbia's democratic political process—and are often not legally allowed to. The third section will cover the influence of the American far right on Serbia's mainstream political parties and its public. This includes all those organizations whose activities are legal and transparent and that can participate in the democratic process or at least in public life. The final section will offer conclusions and a summary of the collected data. At the end, we will be able to identify the main channels of American far-right influence in Serbia.

I chose Serbia as a case study because the influence of the American far right there has been largely unexamined. To investigate American far-right influence on mainstream parties and the public in Serbia, I conducted in-person interviews with several political figures, including a state official, the leader of a parliamentary far-right party, and a former high-ranking member of one populist-right party. The statistical part of my argument examines the appearance of a single phrase, *duboka država* (deep state), among Serbian Twitter users,⁷ a phrase completely absent from the Serbian political dictionary before Trump's first presidency but now a popular buzzword; this is an example of how the language of American politics influenced Serbian political vocabulary. I have analyzed the frequency of this phrase's usage on Twitter from January 2014 to August 2022 by scraping data with Python and visualizing it in Excel.⁸

Regarding the influence of the American far right on right-wing extremist organizations in Serbia, I have done qualitative analyses of content on the neo-Nazi Internet forum Stormfront, on extremist social networks, and on Telegram channels. In addition, I have conducted a comprehensive survey of investigative journalism covering

7 Twitter was renamed X on July 23, 2023; thus, the name Twitter will be used for posts prior to that date.

8 In February 2023, Twitter announced that it will no longer offer free access to its Application Programming Interface (API). Together with adoption of the new X public search policy later that year, these changes made it essentially impossible to freely scrape the public data and use it for research purposes as I did in August 2022. For that reason, the data has not been updated since.

the topic and visited locations in the field connected to far-right activism. Academic research on Serbian right-wing extremism is modest, outdated, and often only scratches the surface of Internet communication and modern developments on the extremist scene. Accordingly, I offer my own classification of three separate waves of the extreme right in Serbia since the late 1990s and describe its current structure.

The scarcity of academic literature regarding the Serbian far right, especially after the migration crisis of 2015 and the COVID-19 pandemic, offers a significant challenge to research and demands original explanations and categorizations on my part. The secretive nature of right-wing extremist organizations presents another problem and for that reason some of my more interesting allegations are hard to prove and remain speculative. Membership in far-right organizations, especially the ones described as extreme, is sometimes hard to trace. Official lists of members usually do not exist, and certain individuals might be affiliated with several far-right groups at the same time. Furthermore, ideological sources of Serbian far-right groups are occasionally difficult to unearth due to the shared intellectual origins of far-right ideas.

What Is “Far Right”?

Defining the far right might seem simpler than it is and should be approached with particular care in a polarized political climate. The term sometimes has a pejorative meaning closely resembling occasional usage of the word fascism as a political slur with no regard for the complexity of the term and historical context in which fascism appeared.⁹ Scholars have identified numerous features characterizing far-right ideology. Michael Minkenberg ironically calls this “feature chasing”—compiling shopping lists of criteria based on the vast number of characteristics found in the literature, a task that complicates the work of definition.¹⁰ Cas Mudde found fifty-eight different traits attributed to right-wing extremism at least once in the literature, with nationalism, racism, xenophobia, antidemocracy, and strong state being used by more than half of the authors.¹¹ More recently, Elisabeth Carter came to a similar conclusion by comparing the definitions of right-wing extremism/radicalism by fifteen authors, finding that the traits identified by Mudde still recur most frequently, with populism emerging as a new feature that should be added to the mix of far-right core values. Carter disagrees that racism and xenophobia are necessarily defining features and argues that right-wing extremism can function without them or even on antiracist grounds; she sees authoritarianism, antidemocracy, and nationalism, however, as essential far-right principles.¹²

9 Elisha Bures, “Don’t Call Donald Trump a Fascist,” *Foreign Policy*, November 2, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/02/donald-trump-fascist-nazi-right-wing/>.

10 Michael Minkenberg, “The Renewal of the Radical Right: Between Modernity and Anti-Modernity,” *Government and Opposition* 35, no. 2 (2000): 170–88, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1477-7053.00022>.

11 Cas Mudde, “The War of Words Defining the Extreme Right Party Family,” *West European Politics* 19, no. 2 (1996): 225–48, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01402389608425132>.

12 Elisabeth Carter, “Right-Wing Extremism/Radicalism: Reconstructing the Concept,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23, no. 2 (2018): 157–82, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2018.1451227>.

It can be difficult to distinguish between “far right,” “right-wing extremist,” and “radical right,” phrases often used interchangeably by scholars.¹³ Mudde notes that consensus does not exist about the proper term to refer to the broader movement, and that different terms have been historically dominant, with far right being most common these days.¹⁴ Mudde makes a useful distinction between the *radical right*, which “accepts the essence of democracy but opposes fundamental elements of liberal democracy,” and the *extreme right*, which is “opposed to democracy and majority rule entirely,” and places them both under the umbrella of *far right*.¹⁵ In that view, the radical right is personified by people like Viktor Orbán or Donald Trump and political parties such as National Rally in France, which has gained considerable mainstream recognition. Extreme right, on the other hand, still belongs to the underground and it covers individuals and organizations that can be described as at least undemocratic and even militant, neo-Nazi, or, in certain cases, terrorist.

Far right as an umbrella term covering radical right and extreme right, as offered by Mudde, will be used here as a heuristic framework. The advantage of such an approach lies in the thoroughness of the definitions, which enables the study of organizations and individuals operating legally and transparently, as well as those whose behavior and activities are criminogenic and shadowy in nature because of their political extremism. This is particularly important in light of the process of normalization of far-right ideology over the last two decades. Ruth Wodak identifies this mainstreaming of the far right in the success of individual parties and, more importantly, in the rightward shift of the entire political spectrum.¹⁶ This process tells us that there is more to the far right than just political extremism. Mudde points out the populist radical right’s ability, over the last two decades, to bring sociocultural topics once considered fringe into public debate and pressure mainstream parties to adopt more radical positions.¹⁷ With this political development in mind, we should be more attentive to the far right’s diversity around the world, which will help us to better understand far-right transnational cooperation.

The Far Right in Serbia

The far right has had an established presence in Serbian politics since the first postcommunist democratic elections were held in 1990. During the decade that followed, the Serbian Radical Party was the major far-right political organization, participating in every parliamentary and presidential election and achieving considerable results in each of them. As the name suggests, the Serbian Radical Party belonged to the radical

13 Jasper Muis and Tim Immerzeel, “Causes and Consequences of the Rise of Populist Radical Right Parties and Movements in Europe,” *Current Sociology* 65, no. 6 (2017): 909–30.

14 Cas Mudde, *The Far Right Today* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 6.

15 Mudde, 7.

16 Ruth Wodak, *The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean* (London: SAGE, 2015).

17 Mudde, *Far Right Today*, 164–66.

right and often publicly emphasized the importance of democratic procedures. During the 1990s and most of the first decade of the 2000s, it was the only significant far-right party on the political scene of Serbia and the most successful one in eastern Europe; it experienced only one temporary setback after the overthrow of Slobodan Milošević in October 2000.¹⁸ With the split of the Serbian Radical Party in 2008 and its electoral failures in 2012 and 2022, the party has become marginal and practically irrelevant. However, other parties emerged in the meantime, continuing the ideological line of the radicals to a certain degree, and adding their own new substance to Serbian far-right ideology. The common ideological substance of all these groups includes Serbian nationalism, social conservatism, anticommunism, opposition to migration, hard Euroskepticism, political Russophilia, and populism.

Unlike the radical right in Serbia, which is politically organized and participates in the work of the Serbian parliament, the extreme right has always been confined to the underground world of subcultures, street violence, football hooliganism, and obscure organizations in conflict with the law but not without connections to high places in mainstream Serbian politics.¹⁹ Since the early 1990s, extreme-right organizations in Serbia have been founded on ultranationalism, religious zealotry, antisemitism, white nationalism, and neo-Nazism. Their activities have come in waves of street violence and activism, which reveal their existence to the public.

What I call the first wave of the Serbian extreme right happened in the late 1990s with the outburst of disorganized neo-Nazi skinhead-related violence in Belgrade. I identify the second wave as starting in the mid-2000s, when Internet communication allowed extremists to effectively cooperate and share ideas online, which resulted in several much larger incidents, mostly against gay people and political opponents across the country. I argue that a third wave of the extreme right in Serbia started in the second half of the 2010s. New organizations emerged as a reaction to the migrant crisis and controversial foreign direct investments in the Serbian mining and energy sector. This chronological distinction will be important below.

The Far Right in the United States

In the United States the far right falls within the wider conservative movement, which incorporates many different worldviews and ideologies. Seymour Martin Lipset wrote in 1955 that conservative elements in American politics can be divided

18 Djordje Stefanovic, "The Path to Weimar Serbia? Explaining the Resurgence of the Serbian Far Right after the Fall of Milosevic," *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 31, no. 7 (2008): 1195–1221, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870701682303>.

19 Ivana Jeremic, "Foul Play: Serbia's Football Hooligans Get Down to Business," *Balkan Insight*, July 22, 2019, <https://balkaninsight.com/2019/07/22/foul-play-serbias-football-hooligans-get-down-to-business/>.

into moderate conservatives and what he termed the “radical right,”²⁰ with attitudes toward Franklin D. Roosevelt’s New Deal being the major differentiating factor. He further observed that moderate conservatives pragmatically embraced elements of Roosevelt’s domestic agenda and internationalist foreign policy, while the radical right rejected the recent political past and refused to accept certain social and political changes as irreversible.²¹

In the 1960s, however, the fusion of the traditionalist Christian right and fiscal conservatism started to take shape, resulting in the election of Ronald Reagan as president in 1980. The idea of fusionism is often attributed to Frank S. Meyer, who wrote that libertarian individual freedom and traditionalist Christian stress on virtue and order are complementary and interdependent and represent a Western political tradition fundamentally opposed to collectivism.²² A free society will prosper when it comprises moral citizens, and hierarchical order will be maintained by the meritocratic rise of the most virtuous. Matthew N. Lyons explains that the fusionist movement attracted conservatives of different kinds and united them behind the idea of anticommunism. But with the end of the Cold War, the movement split into neoconservatives, paleoconservatives, the Christian right, and a minority of extreme-right neo-Nazis and white supremacists.²³ Alex McPhee-Browne writes that the Cold War era represented a unique historical conjuncture, when the focus on anticommunism restrained xenophobic and racist elements within the broader conservative movement.²⁴ The end of the Cold War, however, marked the end of the conservative consensus. In what follows, while discussing the American far right, the emphasis will be on paleoconservative, Christian nationalist, and neo-Nazi groups that gained influence in the early 2000s in conservative US politics.

It is debatable what constitutes the common core of these ideological positions. In her minimalist approach, which tries to identify the elements present among all manifestations of the American far right, Arie Perliger recognizes two major features in the entire scope of far-right activities and ideology: extreme nationalism and nativist sentiment.²⁵ To cover the remaining “gray areas” in the far-right ideological universe, Perliger develops a maximalist approach that adds the features of racism, xenophobia,

20 Lipset’s understanding of “radical right” should be understood in this specific US historical context and not confused with the previously mentioned definition by Cas Mudde.

21 Seymour Martin Lipset, “The Radical Right: A Problem for American Democracy,” *British Journal of Sociology* 6, no. 2 (1955): 176–209, <https://doi.org/10.2307/587483>.

22 Frank S. Meyer, *In Defense of Freedom and Related Essays* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1996).

23 Matthew N. Lyons, “Fragmented Nationalism: Right-Wing Responses to September 11 in Historical Context,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 127, no. 4 (October 2003): 377–418.

24 Alex McPhee-Browne, “The Menace of Globalism: Merwin K. Hart and Nationalist Conservatism, 1930–1960,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 3, no. 1 (2025): 2–27, <https://doi.org/10.5070/RW3.250>.

25 Arie Perliger, *American Zealots: Inside Right-Wing Domestic Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 30.

and exclusionism to the mix.²⁶ The minimalist features are observable not only among the far right of an extremist and neo-Nazi bent but also among more mainstream politicians and movements, with Donald Trump and his nativist rhetoric being the most obvious case.²⁷

Both the radical and extreme right in the United States are relevant to understanding certain political developments in Serbia. The first includes elements of the modern Republican Party and other organizations that accept the basic political consensus in the United States and the rules of the game of the American political system but employ right-wing populist narratives, often including nativist and nationalist undertones. The extreme right covers those organizations and individuals opposed to American political institutions entirely and often in conflict with the law or social conventions, such as neo-Nazis, white supremacists, or paramilitary groups promoting political violence and distrust in institutions. This is a somewhat simplified distinction. Donald Trump often serves as an example of a radical-right figure, but he denies the results of the 2020 presidential election and encouraged violence during the attack on the United States Capitol on January 6, 2021. Even though Trump's role in these events was never settled in court, he nevertheless again became the Republican candidate in 2024 and won the presidential election. His readiness to participate in the election as a candidate of a mainstream party puts him in the radical-right category, but there are early signs that Trump may be even less willing to adhere to the law and "play by the rules" in his second term,²⁸ which raises the question of fluidity between the radical and extreme right. Trump's case shows that the line between radical and extreme right can be crossed back and forth and that radical-right figures can pay lip service to rules they might feel ready to violate under the right conditions.

The Appeal of the American Far Right in Serbia

The appeal of the American far right in Serbia might seem surprising or even contradictory at first sight. The Serbian far right is passionately anti-American and anti-Western because of the role the United States and its NATO allies played in the conflicts in the former Yugoslavia during the 1990s. In the eyes of the Serbian far right, American involvement was often opposed to Serbian national interests in the region. Negative sentiments toward the West and particularly the United States among the Serbian people are deeply rooted in the Kosovo conflict. The NATO bombing of Serbia in 1999 and subsequent recognition of the independence of the southern Serbian province of Kosovo by the United States in 2008 are still stumbling blocks in mutual

26 Perliger, 31–32.

27 Julia G. Young, "Making America 1920 Again? Nativism and US Immigration, Past and Present," *Journal on Migration and Human Security* 5, no. 1 (2017): 217–35, <https://doi.org/10.1177/233150241700500111>.

28 See, for instance, Peter Baker, "People Will Be Shocked': Trump Tests the Boundaries of the Presidency," *New York Times*, January 26, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/26/us/politics/trump-boundaries-presidency.html>.

relations.²⁹ The regional opinion poll conducted by the National Democratic Institute in 2021 showed that regard for the United States and NATO was distinctly low in Serbia.³⁰

Given this opposition to the West and the United States among the Serbian population, the appeal of the American far right needs to be understood in the context of the dominant political narratives in Serbia. The catastrophic outcome of Slobodan Milošević's policies in the 1990s can be considered an example of what Gilad Hirschberger defines as collective trauma, "a cataclysmic event that shatters the basic fabric of society" and forces later generations to be preoccupied with its history.³¹ What happened in the 1990s remains the foundation of many political issues in Serbia. Slobodan Milošević mobilized the Serbian people by evoking historical traumas such as the Battle of Kosovo in 1389 or the genocide of Serbs by the Croatian Ustaša regime in World War II, creating a narrative of Serbian "victimhood nationalism."³² With Milošević's departure from Serbian politics, this "victim ideology" remained alive and gained a new lifeline following Kosovo's declaration of independence and its recognition by Western countries in 2008.

However, even if anti-Western sentiment was strong, individuals and organizations in the West that opposed their own governments' policies regarding Kosovo and NATO involvement in the Balkan wars were often promoted in Serbian media as friends of the Serbian people, or at least as truthful and courageous figures. The image of an "honest Westerner" was constructed about anyone who publicly opposed US or Western involvement in the Balkans, the NATO bombing of Serbia, or the recognition of Kosovo, regardless of their political positions. This is how Noam Chomsky acquired significant praise in Serbia and was even awarded the "Order of Sretenje" by the decree of Serbian president Tomislav Nikolic in 2015 for his comparison of the NATO bombing of Radio Television of Serbia (RTS) headquarters in 1999 with the Charlie Hebdo attacks.³³ Similarly, US congressman from Texas Ron Paul, famous for his libertarian opposition to American overseas intervention, was praised in Serbian media for his opposition to the Clinton administration during the 1999 bombing. When his son Rand Paul launched a campaign for the presidency in 2015, a popular daily newspaper

29 Vincent L. Morelli, *Serbia: Background and U.S. Relations* (Washington, DC: The Congressional Research Service, 2018), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44955/12>.

30 "Between East and West: Democracy, Disinformation, and Geopolitics in Central and Southeastern Europe," National Democratic Institute, July 2021, <https://www.ndi.org/sites/default/files/REAPPS2021researchpublicversion.pdf>.

31 Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, art. 1441 (2018): 1–14, at 1, <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441>.

32 Adam B. Lerner, "The Uses and Abuses of Victimhood Nationalism in International Politics," *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 1 (2020): 62–87, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354066119850249>.

33 Marija Ristic, "Serbia Honours Chomsky for Criticising NATO Bombing," *Balkan Insight*, February 16, 2015, <https://balkaninsight.com/2015/02/16/serbia-honours-chomsky-for-nato-comments/>.

in Serbia reported that “the son of the friend of Serbs is running for president.”³⁴ Paul and Chomsky are politically different, but they share some common ground, including staunch opposition to American interventionism. This brought them a reputation as honest Westerners and friends among the Serbian public.

Such figures existed on the US far right in both its extreme and radical variants, and their opposition to the US government and its Balkan policies was often met with similar enthusiasm among some Serbs. American members of the extremist right after the end of the Cold War became increasingly hostile to their own country, to the point of abandoning loyalty to the United States as a hopeless case of a state “controlled by a secret Jewish elite,” with some of them openly welcoming the September 11 attacks as a strike at the heart of “Jewish power.”³⁵ One such figure was William Pierce, a man who was described by the Southern Poverty Law Center as “America’s most important neo-Nazi” until his death in 2002.³⁶ In a text written in 1999 during the NATO bombing of Serbia, Pierce passionately criticized Bill Clinton and the “Jewish gang” around him and praised Serbian resistance to the New World Order.³⁷ This text and other works by Pierce resonated in post-Milošević Serbia and were translated and published.

Just like Chomsky and Ron Paul, William Pierce was, in the eyes of Serbian media and parts of the public, an honest American who recognized justice behind the Serbian cause simply by disagreeing with Clinton’s Balkan policies. Support for Serbs, direct or at least implicit via opposition to overseas intervention, made the individuals expressing such views popular and likable in Serbia and therefore trustworthy. It was unimportant if those people held left- or right-wing positions or how far on that scale they went. In such an environment it should not come as a surprise that Donald Trump was greeted with unprecedented enthusiasm in Serbia. To many, it was appealing to have an “honest” American as the president of the United States.

American Influences on the Serbian Extreme Right

The Stormfront Connection

The first wave of the internationally linked extreme right in Serbia consisted of neo-Nazi skinheads and football hooligans. Many of them belonged to the organization Blood & Honour, originally founded in the United Kingdom in the late 1980s. The

34 “Sin prijatelja Srba u trci za lidera SAD” [Son of the friend of Serbs in race for the US leader], *Kurir*, April 15, 2015, <https://www.kurir.rs/planeta/1741187/sin-prijateljja-srba-u-trci-za-lidera-sad>.

35 Lyons, “Fragmented Nationalism,” 412, 415.

36 “William Pierce,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed August 19, 2024, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/william-pierce>. Pierce was the author of the 1978 novel *The Turner Diaries*, which was highly influential among members of the extreme right in the United States. The novel depicts a fictional race war in the United States that ends with the extermination of non-whites and nuking of the Pentagon, headquarters of the US Defense Department.

37 William Pierce, “Hands Off Yugoslavia!,” republished in *National Vanguard*, August 14, 2016, <https://nationalvanguard.org/2016/08/hands-off-yugoslavia/>.

Serbian branch of this organization was established in 1995 with permission of Blood & Honour in the United Kingdom.³⁸ Besides organizing music concerts and publishing their own fanzines and a magazine, Blood & Honour was responsible for several violent attacks in Serbia.³⁹ The Serbian branch was internationally connected with other European branches of this organization as far back as the late 1990s.⁴⁰ However, significant contacts with American far-right groups did not exist during this period. It was in the second wave, in the 2000s, that important transatlantic connections developed. In 2000, the autocratic regime of Slobodan Milošević was overthrown, UN sanctions were lifted, and Serbia opened to the world. Even though Internet access existed in the country before, its availability in Serbian society started growing rapidly at the beginning of the new millennium, allowing a broader circle of people to participate in chat rooms, forums, and other forms of online communication.⁴¹ The Serbian branch of the infamous neo-Nazi website and online forum Stormfront was formed in 2001. Founded by Donald Black, an American white nationalist who was also a former member of the American Nazi Party and grand wizard of the Ku Klux Klan, Stormfront is often cited as the first white supremacist site on the Internet. According to the 2014 Southern Poverty Law Center report, Stormfront was the most influential white supremacist community online; its members committed around one hundred documented murders between 2009 and 2014.⁴²

During the 2000s the new wave of the Serbian extreme right was organized around the Stormfront Serbia community subforum. In a 2012 analysis of Stormfront activity, researchers discovered that around 25 percent of posts on Stormfront were written on regional subforums; with 107,762 posts, Serbia's subforum was the fourth most active after those in Great Britain, the Netherlands, and Australia / New Zealand.⁴³ After 2012 the number of posts on the Serbian subforum of Stormfront grew to almost 192,000, though it seems that activity has fallen off drastically in recent years, probably

38 Suzana Grubješić, "Right-Wing Extremism in Serbia," in *Right-Wing Extremism: South-East Europe in Focus*, ed., Yordan Bozhilov (Sofia, Bulgaria: Sofia Security Forum, 2022), 71–92.

39 Đorđe Tomić, "On the 'Right' Side? The Radical Right in the Post-Yugoslav Area and the Serbian Case," *Fascism* 2, no. 1 (2013): 94–114, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22116257-00201012>.

40 Alexander Meleagrou-Hitchens and Edmund Standing, *Blood & Honour: Britain's Far-Right Militants* (London: Centre for Social Cohesion and Nothing British, 2010), <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/BLOOD-AND-HNOUR.pdf>.

41 "Serbia—Individuals Using the Internet (% of Population)," Trading Economics, accessed August 27, 2024, <https://tradingeconomics.com/serbia/individuals-using-the-internet-percent-of-population-wb-data.html>.

42 "White Homicide Worldwide," Southern Poverty Law Center, April 1, 2014, <https://www.splcenter.org/20140331/white-homicide-worldwide>.

43 Neal Caren, Kay Jowers, and Sarah Gaby, "A Social Movement Online Community: Stormfront and the White Nationalist Movement," in *Media, Movements, and Political Change (Research in Social Movements, Conflicts and Change, vol. 33)*, ed. J. Earl and D. A. Rohlinger (Leeds: Emerald Group Publishing, 2012), 163–93, [https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X\(2012\)0000033010](https://doi.org/10.1108/S0163-786X(2012)0000033010).

due to migration to social networks and messaging applications such as Telegram. According to the same study, non-US Stormfront users posted in the “general” (i.e., American) section of the forum much more frequently than Americans posted in national subforums.⁴⁴ Non-US users would explain their local problems and situation using Stormfront’s political vocabulary, which was American in origin, suggesting that US cultural influence on non-US users was more significant than the reverse.

On Stormfront, specific slang and various symbols such as the Celtic cross or Confederate flags were used in order to create a common meaning and sense of community.⁴⁵ It was a place where Serbian extreme rightists of different styles ranging from skinheads to more conventional nationalists and Christian fundamentalists could post content relevant to them, in American and European general sections of the forum, and explain the significance of such content for the wider cause of “preserving the white race” and in terms understandable to their American comrades. It became a way of Americanizing what the Serbian extreme right viewed as nationally important topics, such as the issue of Kosovo, with the aim of gaining the understanding and acceptance of like-minded foreigners.

The forum’s internal structure allowed different extremist organizations to present their programs and ideologies and communicate about their activities. It also served as an online library where various books and texts were available for free. Besides Serbian authors, the library offered Serbian translations of mostly American and German literature concerning national socialism, historical revisionism, white nationalism, antisemitism, and eugenics.⁴⁶ Among the authors who were translated and whose works were free to read or download on the Stormfront Serbia library are the names of some of the most important American far-right figures of the current and last century. Members of Stormfront translated the work of David Lane, a convicted felon and white nationalist, author of the famous “fourteen words” slogan (“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children”), which is one of the most recognizable credos used by the white power movement globally and whose influence in the world of the extreme right brought him many devoted admirers.⁴⁷ Besides texts by Lane, Stormfront’s Serbia library offered translated works of other American far-right authors, including William Pierce, Tom Metzger, and George

44 Caren, Jowers, and Gaby.

45 Kevin C. Thompson, “WATCHING THE STORMFRONT: White Nationalists and the Building of Community in Cyberspace,” *Social Analysis: The International Journal of Anthropology* 45, no. 1 (2001): 32–52.

46 “СРПСКА Н.С. БИБЛИОТЕКА” [Serbian N.S. library], Stormfront, accessed September 12, 2024, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t132727/>.

47 George Michael, “David Lane and the Fourteen Words,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 10, no. 1 (2009): 43–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14690760903067986>.

Lincoln Rockwell.⁴⁸ This library was a pioneering project introducing American white nationalist and neo-Nazi ideology and methods of activism to Serbian far-right extremists.

By this time the Serbian extreme right had become much more diverse than it had been in the 1990s. Barbara Wiesinger divided the organizations into the Christian right and racist extreme right, with Christian right groups characterized by religious zealotry, social conservatism, and xenophobia, while the racist right held similar beliefs but with less emphasis on religion and a pivotal focus on race as the central motive of political struggle.⁴⁹ This division is largely correct but it misses some rather conventional Serbian nationalist organizations such as Naši or 1389, neither of which placed Christianity or racism front and center.

The Christian right incorporated organizations such as Obraz (Honor),⁵⁰ Dveri (Gates), and several smaller organizations.⁵¹ They were present on the Stormfront Serbia forum but on a lesser scale than the racist extreme right. The racist extreme right was united behind an organization called Nacionalni stroj (National Alignment, NS), which rallied skinheads, former members of the group Blood & Honour Serbia, and other extreme nationalists in the form of a loose federation whose members embraced the name, program, and symbols of the organization. Members of the NS became a significant presence in Serbian public life, and its groups acted as splinter cells based on the “leaderless resistance” concept, similarly to Blood & Honour.⁵² They have adopted an explicit Nazi ideology, although somewhat adapted to the cultural climate of Serbia, with emphasis on the protection of the “Aryan Dinaric race,” to which Serbs allegedly belong.⁵³ Between the two far-right currents was the organization Srbska akcija (Serbian Action, SA), which formed in 2010 and shared all typical characteristics of the Christian right but also embraced racism.

National Alignment (NS) and Serbian Action (SA) had the most explicit and active presence in the Stormfront Serbia community, which served as an online base of operations. The NS was the first to establish a presence on the forum when the program

48 Pierce founded the National Alliance; Metzger was a member of the Ku Klux Klan and founded the White Aryan Resistance; and Rockwell founded the American Nazi Party.

49 Barbara N. Wiesinger, “The Continuing Presence of the Extreme Right in Post-Milošević Serbia,” *Balkanologie. Revue d'études pluridisciplinaires* 11, no. 1–2 (2008): 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.4000/balkanologie.1363>.

50 The literal translation of the word *obraz* is “cheek.” In Serbian, cheek is a metaphor for honor or dignity.

51 Marko Babić, “Defining Political Extremism in the Balkans. The Case of Serbia,” *International Studies. Interdisciplinary Political and Cultural Journal* 17, no. 1 (2015): 73–90, <https://doi.org/10.1515/ipcj-2015-0006>.

52 Wiesinger, “Continuing Presence.”

53 Babić, “Defining Political Extremism.”

and statute of the organization were posted as a “sticky thread” in early 2005.⁵⁴ The NS also had its “advertising thread,” where members boasted about their actions, travels, visits to their comrades in Poland and Greece, and even about helping to establish their Russian subgroup.⁵⁵ The NS was banned by Serbian authorities in 2011, and the loose connections between its groups soon dissolved after its most prominent figure, Goran Davidović, temporarily left Serbia. The organization quickly disintegrated, but not before the NS did significant work normalizing neo-Nazism and white nationalism with a “Stormfront flavor” among the circles of more conventional Serbian nationalists.⁵⁶

Serbian Action (SA) was formed in 2010 and almost immediately presented itself on Stormfront Serbia. It is a Christian right organization whose main ideological influence is Dimitrije Ljotić, a pre-World War II Yugoslav politician and leader of the Zbor movement. The ideology of Zbor is described by scholars as fascist, pro-fascist, ultra-nationalist, and clerical-fascist due to the influence of Orthodox Christian theology on Dimitrije Ljotić, but there is no agreement about the appropriate term.⁵⁷ It would be wrong to claim that SA is a typical Christian right organization, as its ideology has a racial element.⁵⁸ It is interesting to note that on the Stormfront Serbia SA thread there was initially no emphasis on race. It was only after several forum members asked about the organization’s stance on race and eugenics that a member of the SA clarified that the organization “was dedicated to the preservation of racial consciousness,” indicating that there was perhaps some peer pressure regarding this topic.⁵⁹ Nevertheless, the SA embraced racist views wholeheartedly, and its members would often pose with the Celtic cross, one of the most recognizable white supremacist symbols in the United States and Europe and the logo of Stormfront itself.

54 “Pravi Program i Statut Nacionalnog Stroja!” [Real program and statute of National Alignment!], Stormfront, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t215772/>.

55 “НАЦИОНАЛНИ СТРОЈ” [National Alignment], Stormfront, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t245784/>.

56 Davidović appeared in public with the leaders of other nationalist organizations on several occasions. For example, in an episode of the TV show Ekskluzivno (Exclusive) aired on the channel Happy TV in February 2020, Miša Vacić, leader of the nationalist organization 1389, stated that he and Davidović met at the celebration organized by Obraz in 2005 and have remained close since, even though 1389 denied any connections to neo-Nazism. See “KSKLUZIVNO—Goran Davidovic Firer u Srbiji nakon 11 godina provedenih u Italiji!,” posted February 10, 2020, by Jutarnji Program TV Happy, YouTube, 28:27, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ih41QFdvzY>.

57 Maria Falina, “Between ‘Clerical Fascism’ and Political Orthodoxy: Orthodox Christianity and Nationalism in Interwar Serbia,” *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* 8, no. 2 (2007): 247–58.

58 “ИДЕОЛОШКЕ ОСНОВЕ” [Ideological foundations], СРБСКА АКЦИЈА [Serbian Action], accessed September 12, 2024, <https://akcija.org/ideologija/>. As the organization states, “Serbian Action emphasizes the importance of Orthodox Christianity for the national well-being of the Serbian nation and state but also the importance of the preservation of the current ‘racial self’ of Serbs.”

59 “СРБСКА АКЦИЈА” [Serbian Action], Stormfront, p. 2, accessed September 12, 2024, <https://www.stormfront.org/forum/t707535-2/>.

Stormfront Serbia lost its importance during the 2010s as messaging applications replaced the need for online forums as a medium of communication. The forum itself remains, but the traffic has decreased substantially. However, the significance of the Stormfront Serbia community in the 2000s, during what I describe as the second wave of the extreme right in Serbia, cannot be neglected. The forum served as an online rallying point for different right-wing extremists who shared everything from music and sports to ideological texts and descriptions of their street activism, thus allowing intercultural exchange between members.⁶⁰ Much of that material was extremist content originating in the United States, which was translated into the Serbian language for the first time by enthusiastic users.

The role of Stormfront Serbia at that time was to help the extreme right cooperate, share, and coordinate their activities, and they did so on an unprecedented level. The presence of the Serbian far right on a predominantly American forum also exposed it to the ideas, symbols, and vocabulary of their American comrades for the first time. Expressions such as “white genocide,” “ZOG” (Zionist Occupied Government), and David Lane’s “fourteen words” found their way into the Serbian extreme right’s way of communicating, and contacts with their American counterparts made it necessary to adopt elements of their behavior in the pursuit of recognition.

The Identitarian Right

The second wave of the Serbian extreme right died down around 2012 after the state took resolute measures against the extremists. However, a major change happened in 2015 with two formative events for the further development of the Serbian extreme right: the migrant crisis in Europe and the alt-right’s emergence as an important sociocultural phenomenon ahead of the 2016 US presidential election profoundly influenced Serbia’s extreme-right online culture and led to the establishment of several new extreme-right organizations.

The third wave of the extreme right in Serbia is fundamentally linked to the migrant crisis of 2015 and its subsequent implications. Most of the new extreme-right groups in Serbia were created in this period, and their ideologies were grounded in xenophobia toward new arrivals. Marina Lažetić explains that because anti-immigration attitudes were a common obsession among the far right throughout Europe during the crisis, differences could be put aside and more flexible and decentralized transnational far-right networks connecting the Serbian with the European far right could be established based on such common feeling.⁶¹ As Lawrence Rosenthal noticed, the existence of immigrants and refugees as “the shared Other” is common to both US

60 Thompson, “WATCHING THE STORMFRONT.”

61 Marina Lažetić, “Migration Crisis’ and the Far Right Networks in Europe: A Case Study of Serbia,” *Journal of Regional Security* 13, no. 2 (2018): 131–78.

and European nationalisms and forms the basis of common nativist identity shaping what he calls “the Nationalist International.”⁶²

The migrant crisis and its social consequences fueled the so-called Identitarians, a pan-European ideological movement with French philosophical origins that rallied organizations all over the continent. The ideology behind the Identitarian movement and its youth wing, Generation Identity, is very diverse, but it can be summarized as nativist and traditionalist. Identitarians react to the supposed “Great Replacement” of Europeans by migrants, a conspiracy that is attributed to actors raging from national governments to the United Nations, “globalist elites,” and Jews.⁶³ They hold an “ethnopluralist” view, meaning that the cultural uniqueness of European nations must be preserved and protected from dangerous impacts of immigration and globalization. Identitarian forms of activism and language were borrowed from many historical and current right- and even left-wing extremist organizations.⁶⁴

Identitarian influence in new extreme-right Serbian organizations that were formed around 2015 or later is observable in the narratives and symbols they use, if not in their open embrace of Identitarianism. Unlike the second wave eager to borrow from American sources, the third wave was exposed to influences whose roots and origins are less likely to be direct and obvious. Christopher Vials showed that the Identitarian ideology of French philosophers such as Alain de Benoist echoed positively in the United States, fitted with its own white nationalist tradition, and inspired the alt-right movement in America.⁶⁵ José Pedro Zúquete concludes something similar, though he is careful to note that Identitarian pride in the ethnic and cultural uniqueness of distinct European peoples was at odds with the alt-right’s white nationalism, formed in the context of the American melting pot.⁶⁶ In fact, alt-right figures, such as Richard Spencer, spent considerable time and effort persuading European Identitarians to adopt a transnational white identity, with mixed success.⁶⁷

While other scholars such as Cas Mudde and Maxime Dafaure offer a more conservative assessment of Identitarian influence on the American far right, claiming that ideological differences are substantive, it is nevertheless accepted that parts of the alt-right in the US are to some extent and via certain individuals connected to the

62 Lawrence Rosenthal, *Empire of Resentment: Populism’s Toxic Embrace of Nationalism* (New York: The New Press, 2020), 115–21, at 117.

63 José Pedro Zúquete, *The Identitarians: The Movement against Globalism and Islam in Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018), 150–51.

64 Imogen Richards, “A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of ‘Generation Identity’: Fascism, Online Media, and the European New Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* 34, no. 1 (2022): 28–47, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09546553.2019.1662403>.

65 Christopher Vials, “Empire after Liberalism: The Transatlantic Right and Identitarian War,” *Journal of American Studies* 56, no. 1 (2022): 87–112, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021875821000517>.

66 Zúquete, *Identitarians*, 296–97.

67 Zúquete, 299–301.

Identitarian movement.⁶⁸ This complicates the task of detecting American far-right influence on the third wave of the Serbian extreme right as it is hard to recognize whether some ideas, support, or inspiration came from European Identitarians or the American alt-right. With this in mind, the next section will focus less on ideological links and more on concrete evidence of American influence on the Serbian extreme right.

A Far-Right Sanctuary

The new Serbian extreme-right organizations of the third wave can be separated into four groups. The first is represented by old second-wave organizations such as Serbian Action. The second group, including such organizations as Narodne patrola (People's Patrols), is anti-immigrant and came into existence as a reaction to the migrant crisis of 2015; emerging as single-issue movements, they are responsible for acts of vigilantism against immigrants.⁶⁹ The third group includes organizations that could be described as properly Identitarian. There are several such groups, including Zentropa Serbia, Serbon, Kormilo (The Rudder), and Junak fondacija (Hero Foundation). They are relatively new and maintain connections with European and American far-right groups and have a rather internationalist and pan-European ideology. This is particularly true for Zentropa Serbia, which is a Serbian branch of a pan-European Identitarian movement of the same name.⁷⁰ The fourth group rallies far-right environmentalists and animal rights activists, with Levijatan (Leviathan) being the most prominent representative.⁷¹

This diverse and flourishing far-right scene attracted the attention of extremists in Europe and the United States, with some of them deciding to settle in Serbia and expand their activities there. The Balkans, in general, are perceived as a front line against the Islamic world by some far-right figures in the West who have been inspired by its ethnic conflicts and violence, such as the 2019 Christchurch mosque shooter.⁷² Marina Lažetić traced the path of Jim Dowson and Nick Griffin, two British extremists who

68 Mudde, *Far Right Today*, 94; Maxime Dafaure, "The 'Great Meme War': The Alt-Right and Its Multifarious Enemies," *Angles. New Perspectives on the Anglophone World*, no. 10 (2020): 1–28, <https://doi.org/10.4000/angles.369>.

69 "People's Patrols (Narodne patrola)," Who Are the Extreme Right in the Balkans? (investigative project), *Balkan Insight*, accessed October 21, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/orgPeoples-Patrols.php>.

70 "Zentropa Serbia," Who Are the Extreme Right in the Balkans? (investigative project), *Balkan Insight*, accessed October 7, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/orgZentropa.php>.

71 "Leviathan Movement Serbia," Who Are the Extreme Right in the Balkans? (investigative project), *Balkan Insight*, accessed October 19, 2024, <https://balkaninsight.com/extreme-right-organisations/orgLevijatan.php>.

72 Hikmet Karčić and Monica Hanson-Green, "Remove Kebab': The Appeal of Serbian Nationalist Ideology among the Global Far Right," *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 2, no. 1 (2024): 16–43, <https://doi.org/10.5070/RW3.1677>.

established close connections with the Serbian far right in 2017, and explained their decision to visit Serbia and connect with the local far right as motivated by the weakness of local law enforcement.⁷³ This institutional weakness is the most plausible explanation in the case of another far-right figure who is of greater interest here: the American alt-right white nationalist Robert Rundo, who lived and operated in Serbia between 2020 and 2022. The case of Rundo and his associates is probably the strongest personal link connecting the third wave of the Serbian extreme right with its American counterparts.

Robert Rundo is a cofounder of the Southern California alt-right Rise Above Movement (RAM), a violent gang of white supremacists that trains extremists in mixed martial arts with the purpose of participating in street fights and protests, such as the “Unite the Right” march in Charlottesville in 2017, where RAM was present.⁷⁴ After the federal case against him for violence at public rallies was dropped, Rundo decided to settle in Serbia in early 2020.⁷⁵ He remained active in the RAM community while establishing contacts and affiliations with Identitarian extreme-right organizations in Belgrade. In February 2021, Rundo was deported from Serbia to Bosnia and Herzegovina after it was revealed that he participated, together with Serbian far-right extremists, in the destruction of monuments to Yugoslav Partisans in Belgrade. Even though Robert Rundo was officially expelled from Serbia, Michael Colborne discovered in November 2021 that Rundo was back in the country, indicating that his deportation was either temporary or that the legal response to his presence was weak.⁷⁶

Robert Rundo has established close activist and business connections with members of the Identitarian organizations Zentropa, Serbon, and Junak.⁷⁷ These organizations were cosigners on street art they made together with several RAM graffitiists in Belgrade. Rundo also painted graffiti in Belgrade with an organization called Beogradski nacionalisti (Belgrade Nationalists). One such work is dedicated to Kenosha shooter Kyle Rittenhouse, bearing the English inscription “KYLE WAS RIGHT” next to the figure of Rittenhouse holding a rifle in front of a black sun, a common neo-Nazi symbol.⁷⁸

73 Lažetić, “Migration Crisis”; Jelena Cosic, Lawrence Marzouk, and Ivan Angelovski, “British Nationalist Trains Serb Far-Right for ‘Online War,’” *Balkan Insight*, May 1, 2018, <https://balkaninsight.com/2018/05/01/british-nationalist-trains-serb-far-right-for-online-war-04-30-2018/>.

74 “Rise Above Movement,” Counter Extremism Project, accessed August 22, 2024, <https://www.counterextremism.com/supremacy/rise-above-movement>.

75 The case was later reopened and Rundo was sentenced in December 2024 after being extradited from Romania in 2023. Ali Winston, “US Founder of Neo-Nazi Network Sentenced to Two Years of Time Served,” *Guardian*, December 13, 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2024/dec/13/neo-nazi-founder-robert-rundo-sentencing>.

76 Michael Colborne, “‘On the Run Again’: Has US White Supremacist Rob Rundo Returned to Serbia?,” *Bellingcat*, December 2, 2021, <https://www.bellingcat.com/news/uk-and-europe/2021/12/02/on-the-run-again-has-us-white-supremacist-rob-rundo-returned-to-serbia/>.

77 Grubješić, “Right-Wing Extremism.”

78 Karim Zidan, “Kyle Rittenhouse, Kenosha, and the New Far-Right Battleground,” *Right Wing Watch*, People for the American Way, December 9, 2020, <https://www.rightwingwatch.org/post/kyle>

The Belgrade Nationalists are composed of members of different Belgrade-based extreme-right organizations and are allegedly organized and coordinated by Rundo himself.⁷⁹ If correct, this would mean that Robert Rundo is the first foreigner to create an extreme-right organization in Serbia with local nationalists as members. The Belgrade Nationalists are well connected with Identitarian organizations in Serbia and have adopted the language and iconography of RAM, seen on the streets of Belgrade in the form of graffiti and stickers.

Rundo also had business ambitions in Serbia. He opened a company in Belgrade called Will2Rise, which was officially registered with the Serbian Business Registers Agency but was liquidated in 2024. He created a fashion brand under this name and marketed his products via some Serbian far-right extremist organizations. For example, Serbon Butik, an online store run by the Identitarian organization Serbon, is still promoting and selling Will2Rise clothes on its official Facebook page.⁸⁰ Will2Rise also participated in philanthropic activities organized by Serbian extreme-right groups. Rundo himself contributed and raised money for the Junak Foundation's 2021 Christmas charity action dedicated to the children of Serbian enclaves in Kosovo.⁸¹

Robert Rundo eventually left Serbia and was recently arrested in Romania. But his presence in Belgrade reveals a grim picture of Serbian legal and institutional weakness, especially a lack of mechanisms to recognize extreme-right ideology swiftly and implement the existing laws preventing its promotion. In recent years extreme-right groups in Serbia have grown in variety and are noticeably more capable of affording legal protection against prosecution compared to the beginning of the previous decade.⁸² Serbia's declining democracy and weak institutions, combined with relatively high levels of violence, have proven fertile ground for local far-right extremists and a safe haven for those from abroad.

The Great Meme War of 2016

The 2016 United States presidential election was an important event in the history of far-right Internet activism. For the first time, the far right was able to reach millions of people with its messages and present itself as a hip new counterculture. Satirical memes that ridiculed issues of race, immigration, social justice, and feminism skillfully

-rittenhouse-kenosha-and-the-new-far-right-battleground/.

79 Ana Lalić, "Desničari jurišnike regrutuju već u osnovnoj školi" [Right-wingers recruit soldiers as early as high school], *Nova.rs*, February 8, 2021, <https://nova.rs/vesti/hronika/desnicari-jurisnike-regrutuju-vec-u-osnovnoj-skoli/>.

80 See Serbon Butik's Facebook page at <https://www.facebook.com/serbonshop> (last post July 18, 2024).

81 "WILL2RISE—Christmas Charity," altCensored, December 23, 2020, https://altCensored.com/watch?v=Sqtgo143_IE.

82 Brankica Janković (commissioner for protection of equality of the Republic of Serbia), author's interview, July 11, 2022.

used humor and irony to send right-wing political messages.⁸³ This was the origin of the alt-right—an almost exclusively online phenomenon initially positioned against political correctness and social justice in the United States, which were seen as hostile to white identity.⁸⁴ According to Perliger, the alt-right was a loose network of white nationalists who embraced antiliberal positions on domestic issues and foreign policy, taking advantage of the mainstreaming of the far right, which encouraged people to say or do what once seemed socially unacceptable.⁸⁵ The online environment provided an opportunity to popularize far-right ideas as people were able to post content anonymously and behave in a way that is much harder to imagine without the protection of physical distance and confidentiality.

The alt-right mocked the so-called social justice movement in the United States, which was already widely criticized for its allegedly ambivalent attitude toward freedom of expression. By ridiculing concepts such as safe spaces or the sensitivity of the political left, and by labeling their opponents as “social justice warriors” and “snowflakes,” the alt-right was able to hide its true intentions behind the veil of irony or trolling and often blend into a much larger crowd of people who were not necessarily on the far-right end of the political spectrum. Ideologically, the alt-right was inspired by various sources. These include the American paleoconservative movement and its non-interventionism, protectionism, and traditionalism; Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony; and the European New Right’s concept of metapolitics, or the spread of messages among the general public with a focus on cultural and ideological struggle instead of actual politics.⁸⁶ Intellectually, the alt-right shares some of its theoretical sources with the Identitarian movement in Europe and the third wave of the extreme right in Serbia.

Although it is hard to quantitatively assess how influential memes were for the outcome of the 2016 presidential election in the United States, there is a consensus that they helped attract the attention of otherwise unaffiliated people.⁸⁷ The Great Meme War of 2016, as some like to call it, inspired the Serbian far right on the Internet. Meme templates widely used by the American alt-right, such as Pepe the Frog, Dolan Duck, NPC Wojak, or red pilling, started circulating among Serbian Internet users after 2015. However, unlike the American alt-right, which had to conceal its true ideological nature, the Serbian far right acted online in a social and political environment that was dominantly nationalist anyway and only suffered under the censorship algorithms of the social networks where they

83 On the use of satire and irony in the “Great Meme War,” see Johanna Maj Schmidt, “Limbless Warriors and Foaming Liberals: The Allure of Post-Heroism in Far-Right Memes,” *Journal of Right-Wing Studies* 2, no. 2 (2024): 79–107, <https://doi.org/10.5070/RW3.1620>.

84 Mudde, *Far Right Today*, 60–61.

85 Perliger, *American Zealots*, 206–7.

86 George Hawley, *Making Sense of the Alt-Right* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2017); Dafaure, “Great Meme War.”

87 Benita Heiskanen, “Meme-ing Electoral Participation,” *European Journal of American studies* 12, no. 2 (2017): 1–26, <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.12158>.

posted. There was no need to hide their meaning or present themselves in a better light for the Serbian public, and their memes were explicitly nationalist and rightist.

This directness reflected the fact that the Serbian right-wing meme scene operated on a very different frequency than the alt-right in the United States with respect to social acceptability and the political mainstream. However, their meme templates, the way they were used, their overall aesthetic, and their political language were borrowed mostly from the American alt-right. In fact, the Great Meme War of 2016 was felt in Montenegro too. Bordering Serbia, Montenegro had a political opposition that included ethnic Serbian parties, who were helped in their 2020 parliamentary victory by popular pro-Serbian meme pages on Facebook posting content critical of the Montenegrin government.⁸⁸ These pro-Serbian meme pages had a monthly reach of several hundred thousand and the number of views online surpassed the total population of Montenegro.⁸⁹

The fact that Serbian right-wing opposition in Montenegro ran an online campaign like the one seen in the United States in 2016 shows that popular meme templates and methods of political promotion and propaganda developed by the US alt-right can be used in local contexts outside of the United States.⁹⁰ There were no similar attempts in Serbia though, as most right-wing meme pages remained unaffiliated with any political party. Nevertheless, content among meme pages in Serbia itself is much more ideological and abstract in nature, with Serbian nationalism being a major inspiration. Although politically less ambitious, right-wing meme pages in Serbia remain an influential part of online culture and a replicator of popular alt-right memes.

American Influence on the Serbian Radical Right

Given the widespread perception that the United States was always hostile to the Serbian position and the national interests of Serbia, there was understandably scant influence from American mainstream politics in Serbia, which left the flow of ideas from the United States mostly restricted to the extreme right. But Donald Trump's electoral campaign and first presidential term changed that. For the first time the mainstream US right, now a radical-right movement in the form of the MAGA Republican Party, gained prominent attention from the Serbian public. Several Serbian political parties and individuals in both government and the opposition praised the election of Donald Trump in 2016 and cheered for his reelection in 2020 and 2024. Moreover, narratives

88 Andrej Ševo, "Politička moć i doseg internet mimova u Srbiji" [Political power and reach of Internet memes in Serbia], *Talas.rs*, July 29, 2021, <https://talas.rs/2021/07/29/internet-mimovi/>.

89 Jelena Vujanovic, "Meme Pages as Public Opinion Leaders in the Election Campaign for the Parliamentary Elections in Montenegro in 2020," *Baština*, no. 53 (2021): 341–53, <https://doi.org/10.5937/bastina31-31115>.

90 Montenegro and Serbia were part of the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia until it dissolved after a successful independence referendum in Montenegro in 2006.

and political vocabulary from the United States gained relevance in Serbian public debate.

The Trump Effect

Even though Donald Trump did not have any concrete pro-Serbian agenda in his 2016 campaign, the mere fact of his opposition to the political establishment in general, and the Clintons in particular, was enough for some Serbs to greet his victory with optimism.⁹¹ There was a common impression in right-wing circles that to some extent, if not completely, Donald Trump would shift America's foreign policy approach to Serbia and the Balkans. In October 2016 the weekly magazine *Nedeljnik* published a fake interview with Donald Trump in which the presidential candidate apologized to Serbia for the NATO bombing during Clinton's presidency in 1999.⁹² Reactions to the interview were overwhelmingly positive and its echo was heard long after it was revealed to be a hoax. The Serbian newspaper with the largest print circulation was the pro-government *Informer*. The newspaper paid for billboards around Belgrade congratulating Trump on his victory, with the message "TRUMP, YOU SERB!"⁹³ This soon became a catchphrase among Trump enthusiasts across Serbia.

These positive public and media reactions were followed by similar responses among political parties. The Serbian Radical Party was temporarily revitalized by the return of its leader, Vojislav Šešelj, from the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague. The party organized pro-Trump rallies and urged Serbs in America to vote for the Republican Party, even during Vice President Biden's visit to Serbia in 2016.⁹⁴ The radical-right party Dveri adopted a more cautious approach. Opposed to the American political mainstream and so-called neoliberal and globalist elites, Dveri embraced Donald Trump's ideological positions as acceptable and much better than those of conventional American politicians.⁹⁵ Dveri would later develop strong international links with several like-minded conservative groups; its representatives participated along with prominent right-wing speakers from the United States in the Conservative Political

91 Henry E. Hale and Ridvan Peshkopia, "Trump Sympathy in the Balkans: Cross-Border Populist Appeal," *Mediterranean Politics* 28, no. 3 (2023): 375–398, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13629395.2021.1956775>; Boško Obradović (president of the Serbian movement Dveri), author's interview, July 6, 2022.

92 Kyle Cheney and Barbara Surk, "Trump Camp Says Serbia Apology Interview Was a Hoax," *Politico*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/10/trump-serbia-bombing-apology-229742>.

93 Marko Angelov, "Nationalists and Populists in Serbia and Macedonia Celebrate Trump's Victory," *Global Voices*, November 10, 2016, <https://globalvoices.org/2016/11/10/nationalists-and-populists-in-serbia-and-macedonia-celebrate-trumps-victory/>.

94 Ivana Sekularac and Fedja Grulovic, "Vote for Trump' Serbian Ultra-Nationalists Chant as Biden Visits," *Reuters*, August 16, 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-balkans-biden-trump-idUSKCN10R1U0>.

95 Obradović, author's interview.

Action Conference (CPAC) 2023 congress in Budapest organized by CPAC Hungary, a local spin-off of the more famous annual meeting in the US.

Enough is Enough (EIE) was a Serbian political party that gained parliamentary status in 2016 and slowly shifted its political positions from centrist and liberal to the populist right. It eventually embraced Donald Trump as a role model and some other conservative elements of the US Republican Party as inspiration. The leadership of the party started this ideological shift in 2017 with the opportunistic intention of filling the space on the right wing of the political spectrum with a Serbian Trumpist option. The idea was to shape EIE as a populist-rightist party that would benefit from the existing enthusiasm for Donald Trump among the Serbian public.⁹⁶ EIE became a major popularizer of Trumpist ideology and American right-wing conspiracy theories, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. While this transition alienated its existing membership, the party failed to make inroads among the established far-right parties, which maintained their grip on the voter base and prevented an EIE takeover.

Enough is Enough has largely ceased to be a relevant political party, but it was the first one whose members actively promoted conspiracy theories originating in the United States, such as those about the origins of COVID-19, the role of Bill Gates and George Soros in its creation, and the secret agendas of satanic elites behind vaccination efforts.⁹⁷ The torch has since been passed to the party We—Voice of the People, founded in 2023. The main figure in the party for the 2023 parliamentary elections was a physician, Branimir Nestorović. Initially a member of an expert team formed in early 2020 by the Serbian government to monitor the spread of COVID-19, Nestorović often undermined and trivialized its work with his nonchalant approach; for that reason, he was sacked from the team, but he also gained a base of cult followers, especially among the vaccine sceptics.⁹⁸ In their analysis of narratives in Nestorović's book *Između dva sveta* (Between two worlds), Jelena Jovović and Stefan Janjić identified numerous American sources for his claims. Nestorović quoted the American satirical website *The Onion*, claimed that the "Philadelphia Experiment" (an urban legend about invisibility experiments in the US Navy during World War II) took place, quoted discredited "alternative medicine" figures such as Dr. Joseph Mercola, and generally preferred to use American and European sources in his work.⁹⁹ Nestorović is also a proponent of the Trumpist narrative about election fraud in 2020 and has shown keen interest in

96 Tatjana Macura (former member of Enough is Enough and member of the Serbian National Assembly from 2016 to 2018), author's interview, August 31, 2022.

97 "Conspiracy Theories from the Parliament of Serbia," Digital Forensic Center, accessed February 22, 2025, <https://dfc.me/en/conspiracy-theories-from-the-parliament-of-serbia/>.

98 Nebojša Blanuša, ed., *COVID-19 Disinformation and Conspiracy Theories in Croatia*, Republic of Croatia, Ministry of Science, Education, and Youth (Zagreb: GONG, 2023), <https://www.croris.hr/crosbi/publikacija/rad-ostalo/811933>.

99 Jelena Jovović and Stefan Janjić, *Nestorology 101: Analysis of Narratives in the Book "Between Two Worlds"* (Novi Sad, Serbia: Novi Sad School of Journalism / Fake News tragač, 2024), <https://fakenews.rs/wp-content/uploads/Nestorology-101.pdf>.

American politics.¹⁰⁰ The political party he dominates managed to gain six seats in the Serbian National Assembly in 2023.

Trump's movement also enjoyed a positive reception among the ruling parties. Then Serbian prime minister Aleksandar Vučić, head of the Serbian Progressive Party, made an initial blunder by forecasting a Hillary Clinton victory and showing up at an event organized by the Clinton Foundation two months before the November 2016 election.¹⁰¹ This decision was heavily criticized, and by the time Donald Trump became president-elect, Vučić and his coalition had changed course, as reflected in neutral to positive Trump reporting and Trump's occasional idolization in some government-affiliated media, such as the tabloid newspapers *Informer* or *Kurir*.¹⁰²

Trump's positive image was so remarkable that the country's minister of foreign affairs, Ivica Dačić from the Socialist Party of Serbia, approached Trump at a United Nations summit to present him with headlines from Serbian newspapers full of praise for his persona—something that Trump apparently liked very much.¹⁰³ Optimism about Serbo-American relations with the arrival of the new president was crowned with the Oval Office signing of the 2020 Washington Agreement between Serbia and Kosovo, a de facto independent state since 2008 that Serbia considers a de jure part of its territory. After Trump's departure from the White House, both sides refused to implement it, but the Washington Agreement showed that Donald Trump was reliable enough for the Serbian government to move the painful and exhausting negotiations with Kosovo further than before, in this case toward economic normalization.

The “Deep State”

Enthusiasm about Donald Trump in Serbia meant that many now listened carefully to what the American president had to say. Words and phrases Trump used to speak about his political opponents or his own positions soon found their way into Serbian political vocabulary. This phenomenon moved beyond the boundaries of the far right, and people of very different political positions found themselves discussing “globalist elites,” “fake news,” or “draining the swamp” in Serbian politics. The language of the 2016 United States presidential election was finding its way into everyday political debate in Serbia.

In particular, the “deep state” idiom embedded itself deep inside the collective mind of the nation (figure 1). Almost completely absent before 2016, the deep state soon became a common phrase in political discussions and among conspiracy theorists in Serbia.

100 Sanja Lazarević Radak, “Authoritarianism, Conspiracy Theories and Covid 19 Pandemic in Serbia,” *Thesis* 10, no. 2 (2021): 51–75.

101 “Vucic to Be at Clinton Foundation Event Hillary Will Miss,” *B92*, September 19, 2016, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/world.php?yyyy=2016&mm=09&dd=19&nav_id=99248.

102 “Analysis of the Print Media in Serbia: October–December,” Public Policy Institute Belgrade, *Quarterly Mediameter* 2, no. 4 (2016), https://www.medijametar.rs/pdf/MM_8_ENG.pdf.

103 “Trump ‘Reacts Positively’ to Serbian Front Pages about Him,” *B92*, September 19, 2017, https://www.b92.net/eng/news/politics.php?yyyy=2017&mm=09&dd=19&nav_id=102347.

Trump and his allies used the expression to discredit all the critics of his administration and the system of checks and balances in the United States with the intention of centralizing power in the White House.¹⁰⁴ This left space for free interpretation of the meaning of the term. With its history of political violence organized by all-powerful security services, Serbia was a perfect environment for the proliferation of deep-state narratives.

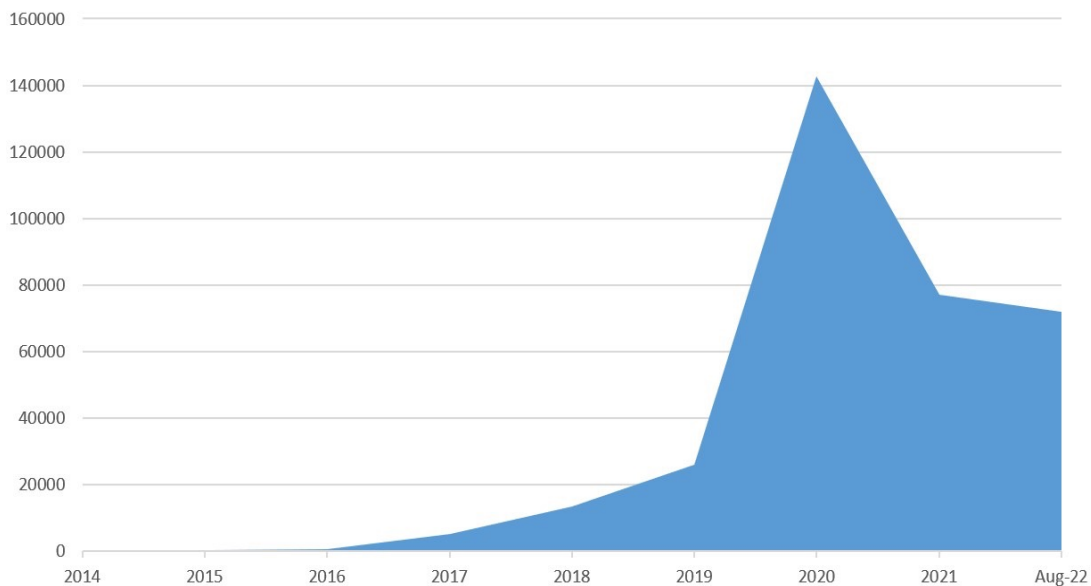


Figure 1. The number of tweets mentioning *duboka država* (deep state) between 2014 and August 2022. Source: author's construction.

Figure 1 shows that tweeting about *duboka država* (including different grammatical cases of both words) started to increase slowly in the election year 2016, then grew steadily, peaked in the election year 2020, and remained high thereafter. Data for 2022 was incomplete, only covering tweets until August 19, when I did the scraping of tweets. But it is highly likely that the number of tweets surpassed the 2021 figure, indicating that *duboka država* had become rooted in the political language of the entire region (the expression *duboka država* has the same meaning in all varieties of the Serbo-Croatian language).

There are two contexts for understanding Serbia's popular adoption of *duboka država* during and after Donald Trump's first term in office. The first is the prevailing Trumpist interpretation of political events in the United States, which was echoed by government-affiliated tabloids in Serbia. *Informer* published more than one hundred articles about US politics containing the expression *duboka država* in their headlines between September 2017 and February 2025, all of them with obvious pro-Trump

104 Robert B. Horwitz, "Trump and the 'Deep State,'" *Policy Studies* 42, nos. 5–6 (2021): 473–90, <https://doi.org/10.1080/01442872.2021.1953460>.

bias.¹⁰⁵ Several politicians in Serbia used the term in different situations; President Vučić himself claimed in February 2024 that he had a scheduled meeting with influential members of the American deep state at the Munich Security Conference.¹⁰⁶ The alleged deep state members were in fact a bipartisan Senate delegation led by Senator Jeanne Shaheen.¹⁰⁷ By claiming that the elected US senators represented the American deep state, Vučić sent a message to voters already familiar with the deep state mythos that he spoke to the important gray eminences of American politics. It also indicated that he had adopted the Trumpist interpretation of the deep state as any separate governmental authority able to check or balance the president's own power.

The second context is domestic political affairs. The term deep state is sometimes utilized by members of the ruling coalition parties and their sympathizers to refer to the administrative remains of previous governments from the period 2000–2012, which are alleged to be obstructing the current government for political reasons. In 2019, for example, the judges appointed during the previous government, led by the Democratic Party (informally known as the “yellows” after their party colors), were labeled by President Vučić as the “yellow judges” and accused of deliberately refusing to prosecute criminals and preventing him from putting them in jail.¹⁰⁸ While not directly saying that these judges belonged to the deep state, the president criticized them as corrupt and motivated by personal malice in a manner similar to Trump's frequent complaints about “witch hunts.” Other politicians were more explicit. A member of parliament from the Serbian Progressive Party, Nebojša Bakarec, in his *Informer* column from November 2024, accused judges and prosecutors, among others, of being a rogue Serbian deep state working against the interests of the people.¹⁰⁹ Similarly, Bakarec's parliamentary and party colleague and one of the president's closest associates, Vladimir Đukanović, repeated some of Bakarec's words on a TV show, *Novo Jutro*, aired on Pink TV on February 12, 2025, where he also blamed USAID for allegedly establishing control over the depths of the Serbian state, primarily by corrupting judges and prosecutors.¹¹⁰ Both in the interpretation of US political events and in commentary on Serbian politics the expression deep state has been

105 Based on author's search of *informer.rs*, accessed February 12, 2025.

106 Đorđe Pavićević, “The President of Serbia in the American Deep State,” *Vreme*, February 21, 2024, <https://vreme.com/en/vreme/predsednik-srbije-u-americkoj-dubokoj-drzavi/>.

107 “Vucic with a Delegation of US Senators in Munich: It Is Important to Protect the Serbs in Kosovo,” *Kosovo Online*, February 17, 2024, <https://www.kosovo-online.com/en/news/politics/vucic-delegation-us-senators-munich-it-important-protect-serbs-kosovo-17-2-2024>.

108 “Judge Says Top Judiciary Body Has to React to Serbian President's Statement,” *N1*, January 10, 2019, <https://n1info.rs/english/news/a450834-judge-says-top-judiciary-body-has-to-react-to-serbian-presidents-statement/>.

109 Nebojša Bakarec, “Odmehnuta duboka država protiv Srbije!” [Rogue deep state against Serbia!], *Informer*, November 24, 2024, <https://informer.rs/politika/kolumne/964910/nebojsa-bakarec-odmehnuta-drzava-srbija-kolumna>.

110 Interview with Vladimir Đukanović, posted by *Novo Jutro*, February 12, 2025, YouTube, 26:47, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rbwduQWIEsY&t=115s>.

applied to tarnish the reputation of the legislative and judiciary branches of government, as well as civil society and the media. At bottom, both contexts show incredible similarity with how the expression “deep state” is utilized in the United States by Donald Trump.

The Shy Pro-Lifers

The overturning of *Roe v. Wade* by the Supreme Court of the United States in 2022 and the adoption of strict antiabortion laws in Poland in 2020 have ignited the abortion debate in Serbia. It would be an exaggeration to claim that this issue is exceptionally important in Serbian politics, but some far-right organizations and political parties have dedicated their time and resources to move the abortion debate closer to the center of public attention. Right-wing criticism attacks what Mirjana Rašević and Katarina Sedlecki call the “culture of abortion,” or the use of abortion as a method of contraception, following a series of increasingly liberal abortion laws between 1952 and 1995, which were not followed by an adequate increase in the availability and knowledge of modern contraceptive methods.¹¹¹ However, unlike Rašević and Sedlecki’s advocacy for better contraceptive education for young people and preparedness of the health system to provide counseling in order to prevent unwanted pregnancies and tackle the abortion culture, some far-right organizations see the solution in full or partial restriction of the practice.

Antiabortion activism and attitudes are a relatively new phenomenon in Serbian politics. Even during the 1990s, when conservative and right-wing political attitudes were revived after almost fifty years of communist repression, pro-life policies were not adopted by any political party. Opposition to abortion was expressed mostly by religious organizations, with the Serbian Orthodox Church being occasionally vocal about the issue.¹¹² Besides the traditional churches, nongovernmental organizations would sometimes gain public attention for their expression of pro-life attitudes. One such organization, Savez za život (Alliance for Life), has recently gained prominence with its 2022 initiative for an abortion ban. Alliance for Life is a member of an international network of pro-life movements and proudly displays its connections on the organization’s website. In May 2023, the Alliance organized a worldwide pro-life summit in Belgrade and hosted prominent pro-life figures from around the world.¹¹³

However, perhaps the most interesting case is the political party Dveri, which held parliamentary status in two election cycles between 2016 and 2023. Although Dveri does not have an antiabortion stance in its program, it is somewhat unclear where it really stands on the issue. The party is not uncompromisingly antiabortion; it never

111 Mirjana Rašević and Katarina Sedlecki, “Pitanje postojanja abortusne kulture u Srbiji” [Question of existence of abortion culture in Serbia], *Stanovništvo* 49, no. 1 (2011): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.2298/STNV1101001R>.

112 “Serbian Church Demands Crackdown on Abortion,” *Balkan Insight*, June 5, 2013, <https://balkaninsight.com/2013/06/05/serbian-orthodox-church-urges-abortion-ban/>.

113 “Beginning of Summit and Basic Info,” Pro-Life Worldwide, May 10, 2023, <https://prolifeworldwide.net/conference-pro-life/beginning-of-summit-and-basic-info/>.

advocated for an abortion ban. However, its members have spoken against abortion on some occasions, and they have been the most prominent political figures in Serbia to publicly condemn abortion as an immoral practice and a health concern. We could say that Dveri has a soft antiabortion stance, meaning that its opposition should be interpreted in the context of Serbian social reality, in which abortion has been legal for several generations and is not a question many in Serbia are ready to reevaluate. Therefore, Dveri's approach is careful and pragmatic. It criticizes the morality and health implications of abortion, and it expresses concerns while avoiding the trap of questioning its legality.

However, on an international level, Dveri is active in a pro-life movement known as the World Congress of Families (WCF). As described by the Southern Poverty Law Center, the WCF is an organization founded by US and Russian Conservatives in 1997 but originating in the ideology of the US Christian right.¹¹⁴ Kristina Stoeckl traces the formative years of the WCF as far back as 1995 and agrees that even though the Russian element inside the WCF is significant, the strategies and key ideas of the organization are American in origin.¹¹⁵

The willingness of Russian (and European) pro-life activists to adopt ideas from the United States is explained by Stoeckl and Susanna Mancini, who point to the absence of a tradition of pro-life activism in Russia; after the fall of the Soviet Union, there were no authentic, local pro-life strategies and language available to be used.¹¹⁶ The WCF holds natalist and pro-life views and sees itself as an organization whose mission is to defend the concept of the traditional family. Members of Dveri have been present at several of the congresses held by the WCF, and Dveri members even organized regional WCF conferences in Belgrade in 2015 and 2016.¹¹⁷

The ties between Dveri and the WCF can be traced to the founding days of the Dveri movement. In an interview, Dveri's president at the time, Boško Obradović, stated that it would be presumptuous to assume that there was too much American influence on Dveri, but he did stress that the American pro-life movement was an inspiration in the early days of the organization. In the same interview, Obradović revealed that Dveri maintains regular contact with Brian Brown, president of the WCF and founder of the

114 "World Congress of Families," Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed October 8, 2024, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/world-congress-families>.

115 Kristina Stoeckl, "The Rise of the Russian Christian Right: The Case of the World Congress of Families," *Religion, State and Society* 48, no. 4 (2020): 223–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2020.1796172>.

116 Susanna Mancini and Kristina Stoeckl, "Transatlantic Conversations: The Emergence of Society-Protective Antiabortion Arguments in the United States, Europe, and Russia," in *The Conscience Wars: Rethinking the Balance between Religion, Identity, and Equality*, ed. Susanna Mancini and Michel Rosenfeld (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 220–57.

117 Naureen Shameem, *Rights at Risk: Observatory on the Universality of Rights Trends Report 2017* (Toronto: AWiD / OURs, 2017), <https://www.awid.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/rights-at-risk-ours-2017.pdf>.

National Organization for Marriage, which opposes same-sex marriage. Obradović also claimed that Dveri was the first political party to become a partner organization of the WCF.¹¹⁸ It should be noted here that Brown was the first speaker at the worldwide pro-life summit in Belgrade, organized by Alliance for Life in 2023, where he discussed the overturning of *Roe v. Wade*.¹¹⁹ The case of Dveri is similar to those of US-influenced pro-life organizations in Russia. After the fall of communism and decades of relatively liberal abortion laws in an authoritarian political climate, there was no authentic, local rhetorical tradition or strategic infrastructure that could be used for pro-life advocacy in Serbia. This does not mean that pro-lifers in Serbia did not have their own views on abortion, but decades without any kind of public debate on this issue took a toll. Pro-life activists in Serbia had to look for a teacher abroad and they found one in the United States.

Conclusion

The far right is globalizing. It is exchanging ideas, sharing methods of political activism, and establishing personal and financial connections. American and European far rights are cooperating, coordinating their activities, and learning from each other. American far right groups provided over \$50 million in financial backing to European rightists in the last decade.¹²⁰ There are reports indicating that the spending has increased since then, with recipients including even the major European far-right parties such as Alternative for Germany.¹²¹ As a relatively small country outside of the European Union, Serbia is somewhat peripheral in this process. But connections have been established with the American far right, which has influenced Serbian political parties, organizations, and even public narratives, both directly and indirectly.

American far-right thought first gained recognition among Serbian extreme right-wing organizations. During the first decade of the 2000s, with the proliferation of the Internet and online communication in Serbia, the far right was gathered around Stormfront, an American white nationalist site and Internet forum. Far-right individuals on the website posted content relevant to the ideology and activities of their organizations and translated domestic and foreign far-right literature, including most of the major figures of the American far right. Until the early 2010s, Stormfront was a

118 Obradović, author's interview.

119 "Summit Program ENG," Pro-Life Worldwide, May 12, 2023, <https://prolifeworldwide.net/conference-pro-life/summit-program-eng/>.

120 Mary Fitzgerald and Claire Provost, "The American Dark Money behind Europe's Far Right," *openDemocracy*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/the-american-dark-money-behind-europes-far-right/>; Claire Provost and Adam Ramsay, "Revealed: Trump-Linked US Christian 'Fundamentalists' Pour Millions of 'Dark Money' into Europe, Boosting the Far Right," *openDemocracy*, March 27, 2019, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/5050/revealed-trump-linked-us-christian-fundamentalists-pour-millions-of-dark-money-into-europe-boosting-the-far-right/>.

121 Keneth Haar, "The Alliance Attacking Freedom," *Corporate Europe Observatory*, May 13, 2024, <https://corporateeurope.org/en/2024/05/alliance-attacking-freedom>.

pivotal online sanctuary for the Serbian extreme right, with its local branch, Stormfront Serbia, among the most active on the forum.

The presence of members of Serbian far-right organizations on Stormfront, whose users were mostly American, meant that Serbian participants in the forum's discussions adopted elements of behavior, language, and ideology from their American counterparts. In the wake of the migrant crisis that began in 2015, the far right in Serbia increasingly adopted the pan-European Identitarian ideology. Serbian right-wing extremists developed friendly relations with other European organizations as well as with alt-right groups in the United States, some of whose members and founders established a commercial and activist presence in Serbia itself.

While the Serbian extreme right was inspired by similar activists in the United States—namely those at the edge of legal and social norms—the Serbian radical right and even mainstream parties and parts of the public were influenced by American figures with a much higher profile. Donald Trump's criticism of the American political establishment and the Clintons convinced some people in Serbia that rapprochement between the United States and Serbia was possible. Political parties both in power and in opposition expressed their praise and admiration for the forty-fifth president of the United States. The political situation across the Atlantic was followed more closely than before and Serbian media covered important issues with a rather Trumpist approach to interpreting major events. New terms such as deep state, globalist elites, and fake news entered Serbia's political vocabulary and gained prominence among politicians, commentators, and journalists, as well as in everyday life, while popular Internet memes used by the US alt-right were replicated in Serbian politics. Right-wing America was largely unknown outside Serbia's far right before Donald Trump's emergence in US politics. The rise of Trump's movement and its "America First" ideology not only exhilarated Serbia's far right but found resonance in the resentful nationalism that crosscuts Serbian politics.

Trumpist ideas and narratives became part of everyday political discussion in Serbia and revealed to the Serbian far right that conservative America exists and embodies values that they consider important. This America, which was mostly unknown prior to Donald Trump's political ascension, represents a friendly force in the eyes of the Serbian right wing—one they believe could spark the renaissance of Serbo-American relations or, at least, a more sympathetic approach toward the Serbian nationalist cause. As they see it, Trump represents, if nothing else, a chance for a positive change in the heart of a global superpower. Trump's first term was an educational journey for much of the Serbian right, who were introduced to a right-wing American worldview, while his second term marks the return of a recognized ideological ally. As the Serbian ruling coalition cheered his comeback, Trump and his family have revitalized their old idea of constructing a Trump hotel in Belgrade on the site of the former Yugoslav

Ministry of Defense, destroyed during the 1999 NATO bombing.¹²² Shared ideology and commercial interests, backed by Trump's unorthodox presidential style, might be the foundation of partnership between his administration and the Serbian government in the years to come.

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122 Eric Lipton, "New Luxury Hotel in Serbia Will Be a Trump-Kushner Joint Project," *New York Times*, January 24, 2025, <https://www.nytimes.com/2025/01/24/us/politics/trump-kushner-serbia-hotel.html>.

ARTICLE

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The Far Right's Quest for Cultural Dominance

Radical Publishing in Greece since 1974

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Abstract: *The article explores the influence of far-right publishing in Greece since 1974. It examines the role of publishers in spreading ultranationalist and neo-Nazi ideologies, highlighting the connection between publishing and political action. It discusses the rise of the Golden Dawn party and the shift from traditional Greek nationalism to international far-right extremism. The study reveals how far-right publishers operate outside mainstream channels, using specialized networks to distribute materials. It also notes the emergence of new publishers and the integration of international far-right themes into Greek politics. The research underscores the cultural impact of far-right publishing, emphasizing its role in shaping public discourse and normalizing extremist ideologies. The article provides a comprehensive analysis of the far-right publishing landscape, documenting its evolution and influence on Greek society.*

Keywords: Greece, book publishing, far right, neo-Nazism, Hellenocentrism, nationalism, ideology

Greece has traditionally held a marginal position in the study of fascism and far-right movements. Previous studies chiefly focused on the 4th of August regime of Ioannis Metaxas (1936–1941) within the context of authoritarian regimes before World War II in Europe and on the subsequent seven-year military dictatorship (1967–1974) (Kallis 2010; Anastassakis and Lagos 2021). Scholarly interest increased significantly when the neo-Nazi Golden Dawn party entered parliament in 2012. The unexpected rise of the neo-Nazi organization, with its electoral support increasing from 0.29 percent in the 2009 national elections to 6.97 percent in 2012, led to a rapid proliferation of research and publications, ultimately making Greece a focal point for studying the emergence of extremist right-wing movements (Ellinas 2013; Ellinas 2015; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015). Recent research has systematically examined the presence and genealogy of far-right ideology in Greece, revealing the growth of “Greek nationalism” among romantic nationalist intellectuals around the turn of the twentieth century (Avdela et al. 2007; Gazi 2020; Matalas 2021). Nonetheless, these studies have not fully investigated the neo-Nazi leanings that became prominent during the prolonged economic crisis after 2010—leanings that can be traced back to editorial choices made soon after the return to democracy in 1974.

This article explores how book publishing contributes to the far right's efforts to gain cultural influence in Greece and traces the publishing activities of far-right groups and individuals since 1974, following the fall of the Colonels' dictatorship and the restoration of parliamentary democracy. Greece was then considered immune to far-right extremism, given that the memory of authoritarianism was still fresh. However, my research identifies two far-right ideological perspectives manifest in print production as early as 1975: an ultranationalist Hellenocentric view and a neo-Nazi extremist stance. It demonstrates how publishing choices can illuminate distinct trends within the far-right political landscape and uncovers how those trends are linked to international far-right extremism rooted in joint operations between the Greek junta and neofascist groups in Italy in the late 1960s. While much of the existing research has focused on party politics, electoral behavior, and anti-immigrant violence (Ellinas 2015; Georgiadou and Rori 2022; Georgiadou 2013; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015; Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2016), it is important to examine the cultural factors that influence these movements in more detail. This empirical study constitutes the first comprehensive effort to systematically document the cultural references and ideological tendencies of the far right in Greece. My research involved ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews with far-right publishers, booksellers, authors, and former activists of different generations.¹ They were conducted mostly in 2022 and 2023 after the COVID-19 isolation measures were lifted. I have gathered valuable information about publishing houses established since 1974 concerning their strategies, titles (such as books, magazines, and fanzines), and associated political activities. This research has provided firsthand insights into radical groups and organizations, allowing for a qualitative analysis of various strands of far-right ideology in Greece. It must be stressed that the term "far right" is generally rejected by those to whom it is typically attributed, including publishers (Mudde 2019, 5). In my interviews, they consistently expressed their disapproval of the label and preferred to identify themselves as Hellenocentric or "patriotic nationalist."

I define far-right print materials as those nativist books that emphasize the ancient and unique origins of the Greek people, the distinctiveness of the Greek language, Greek national superiority, and the concept of a homogeneous nation-state that

1 Extensive interviews have been conducted with Polydoros Dakoglou (leader and writer of ENEK, the United Nationalist Movement; Nafplio, April 20, 2022), Konstantinos Plevris (politician, lawyer, author, and publisher of *Electron*; Athens, December 15, 2021), Ioannis Yannakenas (publisher of *Pelasgos* and bookseller; Athens, August 31, 2021, and in regular meetings to December 2023), Sotiris Schoinas (publisher and heir of *Nea Thesis*, Athens; February 2, 2022), Michalis Georgilas (publisher of *Logchi* and bookseller; Athens, November 25, 2022), Sotiris Yannelis (copublisher of *Exodos* and writer; Athens, October 7, 2022), Christos Goudis (academic and prolific writer; by phone, May 18, 2022), Giorgos Dimitroulias (former activist and publisher of *Antidoto*; Kalamata, July 13–15, 2022), Alexandros Karras (publisher of *Nea Genea*, *Hektor*, and *Nymphios*; via Zoom, May 12, 2022), Dimosthenis Koukounas (writer and publisher of *Metron* and *Historia*; Athens, May 30, 2022), Petros Mylonas (former activist and book collector; Athens, May 30, 2022), and Konstantinos Tsopanis (publisher of *Omni Publishing* and writer; Athens, May 19, 2022).

excludes nonindigenous elements. Additionally, I include publications that advocate for authoritarian rule over parliamentary systems and promote conspiracy theories, antisemitism, and historical revisionism. Moreover, I have cataloged works authored by Nazi and fascist leaders, post–World War II defenders of Nazism and fascism, and by individuals associated with Greek dictatorial regimes or related organizations. For consistency, I have excluded books on esotericism, paranormal phenomena, and Dodecatheism (a revival of ancient Greek polytheism presented as Greece’s “native religion”), unless they hold political significance, as is the case with the works of Julius Evola and Savitri Devi (Versluis 2017; François 2022).

Public and academic libraries do not usually hold books from radical right-wing publishers, nor are they documented in official statistics. Nevertheless, my research in private collections, secondhand booksellers, and publishers’ booklists revealed a remarkable editorial trend and a substantial collection of far-right publications of over four thousand titles, which can be considered representative of a production spanning fifty years and involving more than fifty active publishing houses. All this data is available to researchers in an open-access spreadsheet.² The analysis of the compiled material has highlighted significant tendencies in far-right publishing in Greece. Thus, I will delve into the editorial choices of the Greek far right, tracing the shift from Hellenocentrism and traditional Greek nationalism to neo-Nazi extremism and, ultimately, to alt-right beliefs and ideas. First, I examine how the publishing industry supports far-right political ideology and subculture. Then, I analyze how this segment operates independently of the traditional book market, with its own principles and priorities.

Publishing and Politics

The relationship between publishing activities and political actions is undeniable. Publishers are pivotal in selecting, producing, and distributing books and magazines that propagate political ideologies, offering a platform for politicians and intellectuals. They collaborate with booksellers, the press, and online platforms to maximize their reach. Despite publishers’ critical political role, the dynamic interplay of the book circuit—comprising authors, publishers, printers, booksellers, and readers—with the political sphere remains insufficiently explored. While numerous studies have scrutinized white power music, festivals, and music scenes for their role in fundraising, attracting new members, spreading far-right ideologies, and shaping collective identities, the similar function of publishing communities, bookstores, book fairs, and print and digital magazines have not been thoroughly examined (de Boise 2024). Furthermore, the potential evidence provided by co-editions and translations is often overlooked when

² For the full list (in Greek) of the publications studied in this article, visit https://www.dardanosnet.gr/wp-content/uploads/%CE%9A%CE%91%CE%A4%CE%91%CE%9B%CE%9F%CE%93%CE%9F%CE%A3-1974-2023_add.xlsx.

identifying global connections between far-right organizations. Publishing activity is typically viewed as a sign of either the emergence of new political factions or the fragmentation of existing ones (Camus and Lebourg 2017). However, a detailed analysis of print production unveils how metapolitics operates to normalize far-right political views by systematically “deconstructing the dominant cultural and ideological mindset” and building an alternative narrative (*Radical Right Analysis*, n.d.).

Publishers have always been considered an important asset by the far right (François 2022, 111–21). Grassroots organizations aiming at far-right cultural dominance were established in Greece as early as 1975, as confirmed by Polydoros Dakoglou, known as the “historical leader” of the United Nationalist Movement (Eniaio Ethnikistiko Kinima / ENEK):

In addition to their ability to confront on the streets, the nationalists of the movement were also aware that the “mother of all battles”—for Greece—would be fought in the field of cultural dominance, and they were preparing for it.

They read a lot, not because they wanted to strengthen their existing nationalist beliefs, but because they wanted to connect with the intellectual roots of previous generations and simultaneously gain knowledge to respond to the demands of discussions or confrontations with ideological-political opponents. (Dakoglou 2016)³

At a political rally in June 2003, Georgios Karatzaferis, a prominent publicist and politician who founded the right-wing populist party LAOS (Laikós Orthódoxos Synagermós / Popular Orthodox Rally),⁴ celebrated the coalition of various far-right organizations under the LAOS banner. He especially underscored the essential role of many publishers in this movement, lauding them as true “cultural warriors” dedicated to regaining ground lost to the left (Hunter 2006, 28; Bures 2023, 6):

What is happening today is a big deal. It is a huge ideological victory. It is a response to the erosion of the ideological battle, in which New Democracy contributed a lot: the losers of the national struggle are today the winners in all forums.⁵ Today we are making history for Greece.

3 All translations are the author’s unless otherwise noted.

4 LAOS participated in a coalition government with the conservative New Democracy (Nea Dimokratia) and socialist PASOK in 2011–2012.

5 New Democracy is the ruling conservative party in Greece. It has been in power for approximately twenty-four years since 1974. The term “losers” refers to the Greek left, which was defeated in the civil war that lasted from 1946 to 1949.

Because when you see up here three publishers, Adonis Georgiadis, Yannis Schoinas, and my best man Liakopoulos (cheers of “worthy”), it means we are winning the book battle. And this is an important battle. If we win them back, where for forty years we had ceded the stronghold, then the victory will be great, profound, and irresistible. I congratulate the publishers who have this strength. For some time, we were indeed lulled within the fold. But now we have escaped to fight and win all that was always ours. (Psarras 2010, 133)

Concerning far-right activism in Greece, the connection between publishers and politics can be even more direct. Two far-right political parties, the United Nationalist Movement (ENEK) and Golden Dawn, originated as publishing ventures. Additionally, two prominent far-right politicians, a party leader and a minister who currently serves as vice president of the ruling conservative New Democracy party (Kyriakos Velopoulos and Adonis Georgiadis respectively), initially gained public recognition through their roles as ultranationalist publishers and highly popular book telemarketers.

Far-Right Subculture

A political subculture refers to a specific group within a broader culture that possesses distinct beliefs, values, norms, and practices related to politics. These subcultures often emerge from shared experience, social identity, geographical location, ethnicity, religion, or socioeconomic status, resulting in unique political participation and perspectives on political matters (Miller-Idriss 2020; Gordon 1947). I will focus here on the role of publishers and booksellers in creating new forms of participation and affiliation to extremist nationalist, xenophobic, or authoritarian ideologies (Larsen and Jensen 2023; Miller-Idriss 2020; Wodak 2015). Interestingly, in the digital age, print still holds importance for the far right. As stressed in the announcement of the publication of the Greek edition of *Zentromag* magazine, “the continuous restrictions on the internet bring back the necessity of print as a means of action and dissemination of ideas” (“Periodiko Zentropa” 2020).

The First Publishing Houses

Eleftheri Skepsis

In October 1975, young nationalists in Athens—students and early career professionals—launched a thirty-two-page magazine called *To Kinima* (The Movement). For the first two years, *To Kinima* was a low-cost, typewritten publication reproduced by mimeograph and distributed by militants. In October 1976, the founding team took a significant step: it established a small bookstore and publishing house, Eleftheri Skepsis (Free Thought), located on Ippocratous Street, in the center of Athens. The management was entrusted to Vladimiros Psiakis

(1943–2017), a prominent organization member born in Alexandria, Egypt.

According to their public statements, the motivation behind this initiative was to provide essential texts on Greek nationalism to a growing number of young nationalists who felt disoriented after the fall of the military dictatorship in 1974 (Dakoglou 2016). These texts consisted at first of out-of-print nationalist books from the first half of the twentieth century that no mainstream publisher dared to reprint during the dynamic early years of the *metapolitefsi*, a term that refers to this period of regime change in Greece. The inaugural titles published in 1978 included a book by the nationalist diplomat Ion Dragoumis (1878–1920), a short essay on heredity laws, and a humor book. Just before the 1977 election, the group decided to enter politics and joined a new ultraconservative party, Ethniki Parataxis (National Alignment)—which absorbed junta supporters, royalists, and ultranationalists—as its youth organization, ENEP (Elliniki Neolaia Ethnikis Parataxeos / Greek Youth National Front) (Georgiadou 2019). Although their activism resulted in remarkable electoral success and seven seats in parliament, the alliance lasted only two years. In May 1979, the party imposed its leader, Theodoros Perrotis, a pro-junta militant, on ENEP. As a result, a splinter group headed by Polydoros Dakoglou left *To Kinima* and created ENEK, the United Nationalist Movement.

The 1979 fracture within the nationalist movement resulted in duplicating publishing mechanisms. As a first move, ENEK established its own bookstore and publishing house, Nea Thesis (New Position). At the same time, those loyal to the original group rallied around Eleftheri Skepsis with Andreas Dendrinis (1933–2016) as their pundit. Dendrinis's group also kept control of the magazine *To Kinima*, which continued publication until at least 1983.⁶ Eleftheri Skepsis published more than five hundred titles prior to 2017, when it officially ceased to exist at Psiakis's death.⁷ It soon became apparent that its political orientation went beyond romantic nationalism. From the beginning, it specialized in extremist antisemitic, anti-communist, pro-Nazi, and historical revisionist works. Of the fifteen titles I found within the first five years, eleven were translations of WWII speeches by Nazi Germany's leaders, including Adolf Hitler, Joseph Goebbels, and Joachim von Ribbentrop. Approximately one-fifth of the titles published by 1995 consisted of translations of Nazi and antisemitic literature authored by individuals such as Dietrich Eckart, Julius Evola, Richard Wagner, Friedrich Stieve, Robert Faurisson, and André Lefèvre, often translated by Andreas Dendrinis himself.

6 In 1980, the financial situation of Dendrinis's group was strong enough to support a second store in Thessaloniki and allow countrywide distribution through the Athens News Agency. The last issue I have been able to locate is from June 1983, designated as issue number 103.

7 Psiakis's three sons now operate the business by selling backlist titles and reprinting the most popular ones. However, they have relocated and renamed the bookstore Labyrinthos following several arson attacks that targeted the original store.

Dendrinos has been described as “a Greek national-socialist intellectual, internationalist, writer and nationalist militant, one of the greatest personalities of post-war Greek nationalism” (Metapaideia, n.d.). He had studied political science in Paris and Geneva, and in a 1984 book, *Elliniki Proklisis* (Hellenic challenge), he identified as a firm believer in “Hitlerism” (Dendrinos 1984, 10).⁸ Dendrinos sought to establish links between the Greek far right and the then-rising New Right in Europe. He wrote over fifteen controversial works praising ultranationalist authoritarian government. He also translated approximately twelve titles by authors linked to far-right movements of the interwar period, such as Maurice Bardèche and Léon Degrelle, or by proponents of the French New Right (Nouvelle Droite) and the German Conservative Revolution, including Alain de Benoist, Robert Steuckers, and Armin Mohler. Long articles from Nouvelle Droite journals such as *Éléments* and *Krisis* and the Belgian *Vouloir*, published under the auspices of the French ethnonationalist think tank GRECE,⁹ founded in 1968 by de Benoist, were translated and released in book format without delay. Nevertheless, the initially outward-focused stance of Eleftheri Skepsis gradually subsided around 1995, likely due to the limited impact of foreign titles, as suggested by the individuals interviewed. Until the passing of its director, Vladimiros Psiakis, in 2017, Eleftheri Skepsis redirected its booklist toward domestic concerns, emphasizing the exposure of politicians in general, with special scrutiny on communists, and the glorification of the ancient Greek heritage.

Nea Thesis

The Nea Thesis publishing and bookselling firm was directed by Yannis Schoinas (1951–2016) and intellectually guided by Polydoros Dakoglou (b. 1949), a trained mathematician. I have recorded nearly seven hundred publications from Nea Thesis, most of which were copy edited by Schoinas.¹⁰ Dakoglou stated that ENEK operated 190 offices throughout Greece, which also functioned as points of sale for books.¹¹

This second far-right publishing house focused primarily on Hellenocentrism and works related to early Greek nationalism. It became known for publishing the complete works of romantic turn-of-the-century intellectuals Pericles Giannopoulos (1869–1910) and Ion Dragoumis (1878–1920), both staunch supporters of the irredentist ideology known as the “Great Idea.” The “Greek nationalism” tradition has

8 This book had sold over seven thousand copies by 1987 and is now in its sixth edition as of 2017.

9 An acronym for Groupement de Recherche et d’Études pour la Civilisation Européenne (Research and Study Group for European Civilization).

10 Yannis Schoinas passed away in 2016, leading to his spouse and son’s subsequent management of the house. During this period, the focus primarily shifted toward reissuing previously published titles, with only a limited number of new releases.

11 Author’s interview with Polydoros Dakoglou, Nafplio, April 20, 2022.

historical roots in the nationalist movements of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when Greece sought to expand its borders to the north (Macedonia), south (Crete), and east (Asia Minor) and include all ethnic Greeks still living in Ottoman territory into the Greek state (Koulos 2021). Giannopoulos and Dragoumis played significant roles in shaping the theoretical foundation of Greek nationalism, viewing it as synonymous with patriotism and fostering the idea of Greek cultural supremacy over the Levant and western Europe (Demertzis and Stratoudaki 2020; Mazis 2014). The prominence given to culture may be contextualized within the framework established by Jakob Philipp Fallmerayer's 1830 study, titled *Geschichte der Halbinsel Morea während des Mittelalters* (History of the Peloponnesian peninsula during the Middle Ages), which critically examined the racial purity and unbroken historical continuity with ancient Greece claimed by modern Greek-speaking inhabitants of the region. Under the weight of the fiery public controversy that followed, the significance of the biological factor was diminished in favor of other parameters that demonstrated the disputed national continuity, such as geography, climate, location, and, notably, language and culture. Greek responses to Fallmerayer's assertions centered on the enduring preeminence of a "cultural and spiritual Hellenism" (Greenberg and Hamilakis 2024, 406), according to which Greeks had repudiated external influences while maintaining a continuous presence within a distinct geographical domain (Koulouri 2007, 19–21, 38–39; Veloudis 1982; Demertzis and Stratoudaki 2020).

Far-right Hellenocentrism uses pseudoscientific arguments to promote a distorted view that diminishes the achievements of other cultures and peoples. It embraces the controversial idea of hyperdiffusionism, interpreting similar cultural and intellectual accomplishments in various geographical locations as evidence of ancient Greece's dominant influence. From this viewpoint, the Greeks are seen as an indigenous group (the Pelasgians) unrelated to the Indo-Europeans, and the Greek language is considered the origin of all languages. Scientific subjects are enveloped in mystique and approached with a conspiratorial mindset akin to that found in political matters. Historical and political phenomena are often reduced to oversimplified narratives and presented with conclusive interpretations, circumventing the necessity for thorough intellectual analysis. Some indicative titles are *Ellinika: I Glossa ton protoplaston: Foinikia-Kadmia. I Apati ton Foinikiston, oi opoioi stirichthikan ston mythomani Irodoton* (Greek: The language of Adam and Eve and the fraud of the Phoenicians based on the mythomane Herodotus) by the journalist Dimitris Droumboukis (Nea Thesis, 1999); *I Inca milousan ellinika: I archaioellinikes katavoles stin glossa tous* (The Incas spoke Greek: The ancient Greek origins of their language) by the engineer Kostas Chadziannakis (Eleftheri Skepsis, 1989); and *I elliniki riza ton Vaskon: Glossologiki periigisis* (The Greek roots of the Basques: A linguistic survey) by the same author (Eleftheri Skepsis, 2001). The proponents of Hellenocentrism encompass diverse backgrounds, including self-taught "experts" from fields like engineering, medicine, physics, and journalism. Their primary belief is based on the antiquity of the Greek language, which they consider a sign of superiority. They present an alternative vision of ancient Greece featuring astonishing technological artifacts, flying vessels, anthropoids, and even computing devices to

support their claim (Papanastasiou 2006, 437). In the context of Greek supremacy, Nea Thesis's publications emphasize a strong defense of Hellenism against supposed ongoing threats while also embracing various conspiracy theories, particularly those that are anti-American and antisemitic.¹²

In addition to publishing activities, the Hellenocentrism movement's political action included participating in nationalist events of "memory and honor" in Meligalas, Makrygianni, and other nationalist *lieux de mémoire* from the civil war period. These events sometimes led to confrontations with members of ONNED, the youth organization of New Democracy, which also claimed these spaces. Other initiatives involved a protest march in Athens on May 9, 1986, following the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and an energy policy gathering in Athens in 1984. The movement organized monthly speeches by Polydoros Dakoglou, which required an entrance fee, and three-day events titled "Nationalist Summer—Struggle without Vacations," partially funded by book sales. For the inaugural "Nationalist Summer 1986" the title "The Power of Our Will" was chosen, inevitably evoking the 1934 Nuremberg Nazi Party Congress made famous by Leni Riefenstahl's film *Triumph of the Will*. I found evidence for a second "Nationalist Summer 1987" with the central slogan "Resist Degradation," but the initiative seems to have stopped there (ethnikismosgr, n.d.).

Two Distinct Trends

In the 1980s, the trends emerging in the initial publishing ventures evolved into distinct comprehensive publishing programs by new specialized publishers. Pelasgos, Kadmos, EL, and more recently Exodos (Exit) endorsed the concept of Greek supremacy. At the same time, Golden Dawn and its successors took over the task of spreading extremist neo-Nazi literature in Greece. During this period, Greece underwent a major transformation. The country saw its first social democratic government, achieved significant progress in

12 For instance: Jean Boyer, *Oi Echthroï tis Ellados* (The enemies of Greece) (Nea Thesis, 1984), probably an excerpt from the original published in French in 1979 under the title *Les pires ennemis de nos peuples*, misleadingly naming Bogotá as its place of publication; Roger Garaudy, *Oi Themeliodeis Mythoi tis Israilinis Politikis* (The founding myths of modern Israel) (Nea Thesis, 1996), published the same year as the highly controversial French original; Athanasios Strigas, *Oi Tympanistes tou Pentagonou: I Diataragmeni Afosiosi ton HPA ston Diamelismo tou Ellinismou* (The Pentagon drummers: The demented commitment of the US to Hellenism's dissolution) (Nea Thesis, 1993); and Georgios Georgalas, *Pos themeliothike i Pax Americana* (How the Pax Americana was established) (Nea Thesis, 1997, 2 vols). Antisemitism is particularly pronounced in the works of Konstantinos Plevris (b. 1939), a Greek ultranationalist politician, lawyer, and author associated with neo-Nazism. Plevris was tried for his 1,397-page book *Oi Evraioi: Oli I Alitheia* (The Jews: The whole truth) (Electron, 2006) under the provisions of the Anti-Racist Law. He was sentenced in the first instance in 2007 to fourteen months imprisonment with a three-year suspension for incitement to racist acts against Jews and for insulting the Jewish people but was acquitted by the Court of Appeal in 2009 on both charges. See Michal Navoth, *Anti-Semitism in Greece: The Trial of Konstantinos Plevris* (Tel Aviv: Stephen Roth Institute for the Study of Contemporary Antisemitism and Racism, 2011), <https://bit.ly/ΔίκηΠλευρη>. In 2002, Plevris founded his own publishing house, Electron, and gathered there all his works that had been published by various publishers up to that time.

democratization and modernization, and experienced extensive changes that promoted mass upward social mobility. The governing party (PASOK) followed “a specific blend of anti-Western rhetorics and pro-Western practice” (Martinelli 2004, xvii). As one scholar noticed, “the policies of joining the European Community and consolidating Western democracy were pursued while expressing an essentially nationalist, populist and anti-Western ideology” (Sotiropoulos 2013, 185–205). Although radical right-wing parties had yet to assume a significant role in Greece’s political life, their publishing efforts proved influential.

Ultranationalism

The Greek-centered approach in far-right publishing focuses on limited translations and the release of works by Greek authors on topics of national interest. This approach considers foreign models less relevant and prioritizes national paradigms, including support for the domestic authoritarian regimes of 1936 and 1967. The emphasis on Greek supremacy covers a wide range of subjects, from reverence for classical Greece to speculative theories regarding the extraterrestrial origins of the Greek people. However, it generally excludes “foreign” fascist and neo-Nazi literature, which appears only sporadically in the catalogs of “Greek nationalism” publishers.

Pelasgos was established in Athens in 1985 by Ioannis Yannakenas (b. 1961), an engineer turned publisher and bookseller. Recognized for its extensive catalog of approximately nine hundred titles on various subjects, it publishes studies in political history and covers the historical presence of Greeks globally. Starting in 2015, it was also the first to produce a thorough series of apologetic works regarding the Colonels’ dictatorship from 1967 to 1974. This genre of literature typically highlights the leaders’ resolve, efficiency, and dedication to national principles, while juxtaposing these traits with the perceived deficiencies of parliamentary democracy.¹³ The company holds a prominent position among nationalist publishers. Besides Pelasgos, Yannakenas operates three additional imprints (Protovoulia, Machi, and Rissos) and supports several weekly publications and specialized magazines of local interest. Since 1982, he has organized the annual memorial ceremony to commemorate the anniversary of Ion Dragoumis’s assassination by political adversaries in 1920. Moreover, he has been a parliamentary candidate for various nationalist parties on several occasions. In June 2008, when his bookstore was destroyed by arson, a fundraising campaign among his colleagues was initiated to support its recovery. It has since been renamed “The Friends’ Solidarity.”

In the early 1990s, Yannakenas and other nationalist publishers saw a rise in the readership of Greek nationalist literature due to two distinct factors. The first was the Macedonian name issue that emerged in 1991, following the dissolution of Yugoslavia. The newly independent state, previously known as the Socialist Republic

13 I have identified fifty-two titles about the Colonel’s dictatorship, which is 5.5 percent of the total Pelasgos production up to 2024.

of Macedonia, sought to use the name “Macedonia” without any geographical qualifier. Greece contended that this usage implied territorial claims over the northern Greek province bearing the same name and consequently refused to recognize the new state. This situation led to massive nationalist mobilizations in Athens and Thessaloniki, with rallies allegedly attended by more than a million participants each, during which ethnocentric and xenophobic discourse was prevalent. A central aspect of this debate was the Greek identity of ancient Macedonians, prompting many readers to seek historical and scientific explanations for contemporary political issues and boosting relevant titles and book sales (Skoulariki 2021).

The second factor that benefited the nationalist book market during the same period was the introduction of private TV channels in 1989, which initially broadcast only locally. These channels soon reached a wider audience, offering an alternative to state-controlled television programs. Much of their content consisted of telemarketing shows, including those promoting Greek nationalist books. Georgios Karatzaferis was among the first to establish private radio and TV channels (Radio City and Tele City, later renamed Tele Asty), where he hosted publishers Adonis Georgiadis, Kyriakos Velopoulos, and Dimosthenis Liakopoulos to discuss current political affairs and promote their books. This platform allowed them to rapidly gain public exposure, and they subsequently joined Karatzaferis’s party LAOS (Popular Orthodox Rally), founded in 2000 (Grammenos 2019).¹⁴ Adonis Georgiadis, born in 1972, managed the family publishing business, “The Library of the Greeks,” which was established by his father, Athanasios, around 1950. The company specializes in translating historical ecclesiastical and ancient Greek texts into modern Greek. Georgiadis, a history degree holder from the University of Athens, has been reprinting backlist titles and introducing new publications, such as works on Greek-Turkish relations, children’s textbooks for learning ancient Greek as a living language, Georgiadis’s critiques of the purported “myth” of homosexuality in ancient Greece,¹⁵ controversial claims surrounding the “discovery” of Alexander the Great’s tomb in Egypt, explorations of Greek mythology as an inspiration for modern science, and analyses of communism as a utopian ideology. He largely embraces pseudoscientific and conspiracy theories that support the central position of Greek antiquity in global developments in all fields and the malevolent concealment of this truth by various dark centers. These titles present an intricate blend of Hellenocentric perspectives, incorporating elements

14 LAOS, a populist party in Greece, played a significant role in mainstreaming far-right discourse. Notably, several prominent members of LAOS transitioned into ministerial positions within the governing New Democracy party, including Makis Voridis, Thanos Plevris, and Adonis Georgiadis. All three quit LAOS in 2012 after the party lost the elections.

15 It was issued simultaneously in Greek and English. See Adonis Georgiadis, *Homosexuality in Ancient Greece: The Myth is Collapsing* (Athens: I Vivliothiki ton Ellinon, 2004).

of antiquarianism, Dodecatheism, the polytonic accentuation system, and anti-communism.¹⁶

Kyriakos Velopoulos, born in 1965, leads the ultranationalist Elliniki Lysi (Greek Solution) party, which gained 4.44 percent of votes and secured twelve seats in the June 2023 elections. The far-right ideological framework of the party is marked by a significant inclination toward Orthodox Christianity, a pro-Russian orientation, and the identification of scapegoats, such as politicians, Jews, communists, and homosexuals. The party supports the reintroduction of the death penalty and suggests mining the Evros border with Turkey to secure Europe. It claims to have the support of Elon Musk and has recently requested that Musk be invited to address the European Parliament (Kontrafourti 2025). Velopoulos is also a prolific writer. His books amalgamate themes regarding antiquity, occultism, conspiracy theories, and the long-standing rivalry between Greeks and Jews, often weaving in extraterrestrial-inspired interpretations that guarantee substantial sales (Kourdis 2016). These publications are released by Kadmos Publishing, his privately owned publishing house, established in 2000 and headquartered in Thessaloniki.¹⁷

16 Due to a series of deliberate acts of arson targeting the premises of Georgiadis Publishing, the distribution of their publications has been limited to telemarketing sales and online platforms. It is worth noting that Georgiadis Publishing has previously faced legal consequences related to labor disputes and violations of intellectual property rights. Notable examples of the titles published by Georgiadis include Ioannis Dionis, *O Prometheus epistrefei: Elliniki mythologia pigi gnoseon tis simerinis epistimis* (Prometheus returns: Greek mythology as a source of knowledge for today's science) (2004); Diamantis K. Koutoulas, *I apagorevmeni istoria ton Archaion Ellinon* (The forbidden history of the ancient Greeks) (2005); Kostas Skandalis, *I atheati opsi tou indoevropaikou zitimatos: I theoria tis vythismenis Aigiidos* (The unseen side of the Indo-European question: The sunken Aegean theory) (2006); Panagiotis Grigoriadis, *I elliniki katagogi ton Soumerion: Enas minoikos stathmos anefodiasmou pros tin Kina kai tin Mikronisia tou 3120 BC* (The Greek origin of Sumeria: A Minoan supply station to China and Micronesia in 3120 BC) (2008); Vartholomeos Lazaris, *I Ellada eis olon ton kosmon. Endeixeis parousias panarchaion Arion (gigenon) ellinikon fylon ana ton kosmon. Ta ellinika kai ellinogeni toponymia tis Oikoumenis me tis topografikes syntetagmenes tous* (Greece throughout the world: Evidence of the presence of ancient Aryan [native] Greek tribes throughout the world. The Greek and Hellenic toponyms of the Hellenic world with their geographical coordinates) (2009, out of print); and Alexandros Angelis, *I fylitiki synecheia ton Ellinon apo tin proistoria mechri simera* (The racial continuity of the Greeks from prehistory to the present day) (2009, with a foreword by Adonis Georgiadis, out of print).

17 In a recent revelation, it came to light that Velopoulos has been involved in tax fraud for the nonpayment of value-added tax (VAT) for various products he sells alongside his books, including wax ointments from Mount Athos, toothpaste, and chocolate cookies. The titles of the books he has authored serve as examples of his booklist: *To 4o Reich einai edo: I Dialysi tis evropaikis ideas* (The 4th Reich is here: Dissolution of the European idea) (2016); *Ypogeios Pagkosmios Polemos: I Thesi tis Elladas* (Underground world war: The place of Greece) (2015); *I Rosia tou Putin: Ifaisteio etoimo na ekragei o planitis* (Putin's Russia: The planet is a volcano ready to explode) (2015); *Planitikos Metaschimatismos tou 21ou Aiona kai Ellada* (Planetary transformation in the 21st century and Greece) (2014); *Makedonia kai Yvreis* (Macedonia and insults) (2008); *Iisous kai Dias: Orthodoxoi kai Dodekatheo—Ekas oi Veviloι* (Jesus and Zeus: Orthodoxy and the Dodecatheon—Begone, ye profaners!) (2003); *Alexandros, o Megistos ton Ellinon* (Alexander, the greatest of the Greeks) (2001); and *Pagkosmiopiisi, o Megalos Olethros tis Anthropotitas* (Globalization, the great doom of humanity) (2001).

Finally, the third telemarketer associated with the Hellenocentric movement is Dimosthenis Liakopoulos, born in 1956. Originally a high school physics teacher, he founded EL Publishing in Thessaloniki circa 1990. He has written over 140 titles, with sales reportedly surpassing two million copies to date (“Liakopoulos,” n.d.). Known for promoting conspiracy theories and urban legends, he advances the most extravagant combination of “commonly acceptable data with mythical and legendary texts, and data from unverified and unknown sources” (Kourdis 2016, 239). Liakopoulos sells his books solely in his own company bookshops and through his TV broadcasts. With evocative music playing in the background and an apocalyptic sense of urgency, he presents his publications in multivolume editions (e.g., ninety volumes for the series “Why and How They Live Among Us”) and packages of four to six titles with flashy glossy covers. Liakopoulos’s perspectives are founded on archaeolatry, Hellenocentrism, and the belief in the superiority of Greek civilization. Recent research indicates that the financial crisis starting in 2010 significantly increased and intensified belief in conspiracy theories (Kourdis 2016; Mylonas 2011, 83). Hence, Liakopoulos’s extravagant speculations regarding the conflict between two forces—the Elohim and the Nephelims, the material and the spiritual entities—and the anticipated extraterrestrial intervention to aid the Greeks should be considered within the context of increasing economic and political instability.

Ta Paidia tis Antigonis (Antigone’s Offspring) is, in my opinion, the most potent Hellenocentric group today. These young individuals, mostly graduate students and PhD candidates, have been publishing the magazine *To Enzymo* (The Enzyme) since 2013, and they established the cooperative Exodos Publications in 2019. In 2017–2018, the group transitioned from advocating for internationalism in their early publications to promoting Greek nationalism, citing the ongoing migration flows toward Greece as a contributing factor. This shift from far-left ideologies to reactionary traditionalism, emphasizing the protection of indigenous European cultures against globalization, has already been noted (Bures 2020, 37–38). In a 2022 online article, they declared: “We do not want another revolution. We do not want more ‘progress.’ We want reaction, restoration, counterrevolution. We want the restoration of all human communities before they are crushed in the wheels of capitalism, technocracy, and transhumanism” (Ellinikosblog 2022). In the Ukrainian war, Ta Paidia tis Antigonis aligned with Russia. According to their viewpoint, Russia envisions a future Eurasian empire and represents an alternative to decadent Western modernity and individualism. They consider the war in Ukraine a just patriotic war of liberation, like what Greece should have done when Turkey invaded and occupied Cyprus in 1974. Unlike earlier traditional Hellenocentric publishers, this group has an international orientation, translating and publishing articles and aesthetically pleasing books by a wide range of authors, such as Max Weber, Zeev Sternhell, Muammar Gaddafi, Alain de Benoist, Adriano Erriguel, and Julius Evola.

This strategy differentiates their production and broadens its impact beyond their immediate sphere of influence.¹⁸

Nevertheless, the Hellenocentric trend appears to be waning, losing its once vibrant influence and allure. In the latest elections, in June 2023, the Greek nationalist coalition Patriotikos Synaspismos (Patriotic Rally), under the leadership of civil engineer and prominent contractor Prodromos Emfietzoglou, garnered only 0.5 percent of the vote and consequently had to disband shortly thereafter. Two new far-right parties were brought into parliament instead: the Spartans (4.68 percent), which essentially serves as a platform for the public interventions of the imprisoned deputy leader of Golden Dawn, Ilias Kasidiaris; and a party of the alt-right that was unknown until May 2023, Niki (Victory)—Democratic Patriotic Movement (3.7 percent), led by a theologian, Dimitris Natsios. Natsios too has benefited from TV popularity as “a talk-show presenter on the religious TV channel 4E for a decade” (Kordas 2023, 242). Niki enjoys support from obscure religious organizations and certain fundamentalist Greek Orthodox Mount Athos monasteries. The party gained a reputation during the COVID-19 pandemic for its support of the anti-vaxxer movement and its refusal to comply with the restrictive measures for churchgoers. It adopts a pro-Russian stance, like Kyriakos Velopoulos’s Greek Solution, with an agenda centered on ultraconservatism, homophobia, anti-vaccination beliefs, and opposition to abortion. Niki produces only electronic flipbooks to download from its website, addressing topics such as *Politikes theseis gia ti niki tou Ellinismou kai tis anthropinis axioprepeias* (Political theses for the victory of Hellenism and human dignity); “*Fakeloma tou politis*” *oi nees ilektronikes taftotites* (“Citizen’s surveillance”: The new electronic identity cards); and *Sexoualiki diapedagogisi sta ellinika scholeia?* (Sexual education in Greek schools?) (Niki, n.d.). It represents the rise of the alt-right in Greece with a strategy of investing in social media rather than print and changing the agenda to issues like identity politics, anti-feminism, and anti-wokeism. It does not advocate for a violent overthrow of the state but aims to establish a new far-right hegemony, undermine liberal institutions, solidify authoritarianism, and normalize inequalities. We are witnessing an emerging alt-right metapolitical strategy to disseminate and embed specific cultural ideas, attitudes, and values within society, thereby paving the way for a deeper political transformation (Stein 2018). We must recognize, however, that the Niki party’s strong focus on religion (“Orthodoxy in our cultural DNA”) differs significantly from the international alt-right, which has a more complex relationship with Christianity (Berry 2022).

The “Black International”

In contrast to Greek-focused publications, other radical right booklists and magazines display an international perspective that connects extremist groups in Greece to the

18 In 2019, *To Enzymo* received the third prize at the Greek Graphic Design and Illustration Awards. Meticulous editing and book aesthetics are not common in far-right editions.

broader world. Even though post-WWII efforts to create “institutionalized neo-Fascist Internationals” have proved unsuccessful, an informal internationalization has been achieved through the writings of doctrinaires and popularizers of wider appeal (Dard 2020; Camus and Lebourg 2017, 53–97). International connections and mutual exchanges through journals and publishers that welcomed foreign collaboration informed and shaped militants on a European scale. Magazines with the same title, such as *Blood & Honour* or *Zentromag* (Shaffer 2017; Išpanović 2022),¹⁹ have been available in various language editions including Greek, sharing articles and maintaining a consistent layout. Publishing companies promoting Nouvelle Droite ideas and the Identitarian movement, like Antaios and Arktos Media, have been operating internationally.²⁰ Translations, interviews, and reports from abroad may signify an eagerness to stay informed of current discussions, an openness to partnerships, or a desire to appear well connected and internationally acknowledged. As e-books and digital publishing are still in their infancy in Greece, print culture remains predominant (Zannos 2022).

While Eleftheri Skepsis gradually reduced its neo-Nazi publications toward the end of the twentieth century, new publishing houses took up the charge. The first to appear was the pro-Nazi extreme right-wing organization Chrysi Avgi (Golden Dawn), initially established as a publishing initiative. In December 1980, the monthly magazine *Chrysi Avgi: Ethnikosocialistiki periodiki ekdosis* (Golden Dawn: Periodical National-Socialist Publication), founded by twenty-three-year-old Nikos Michaloliakos, circulated its first issue. He addressed his “fellow fighters” with a Nordic tone as follows: “We, the heirs of the Grail, who were lulled to sleep by the echoes of the last battle’s explosions, have returned, prepared for the ultimate beginning, a beginning befitting a Wagnerian finale” (Michaloliakos 1980, 19).

The texts published in *Chrysi Avgi* (Golden Dawn) magazine were written in the archaic form of modern Greek, displaying strong antisemitism and open admiration for Nazism, “the only truly revolutionary perspective of European civilization” (*Chrysi Avgi* 1988, 8). At the start, it was a sixteen-page black-and-white mimeographed magazine that made no secret of its neo-Nazi affiliation. Articles were published anonymously or under pseudonyms and almost exclusively with national socialist themes and graphics. In 1982 Golden Dawn deepened its publishing business, establishing its own publishing

19 *Blood & Honour* is a neo-Nazi music promotion network and right-wing extremist political group founded in the United Kingdom by Ian Stuart Donaldson and Nicky Crane in 1987. It advocates for racially oriented “white music.” The first issue of the magazine by the same name was released in July 1987. The network has official divisions in several countries and has been banned in Spain, Germany, Russia, and Canada. *Zentromag* is the print magazine of Zentropa network, a far-right transnational forum. It is published in Germany, France, Serbia, and Greece (Zentropa Serbia 2023).

20 Arktos Media published Markus Willinger’s Identitarian manifesto in Greek in 2014 under the title *Genia tis Taftotitas: Mia diakyrixi polemou kata tis genias tou '68* (available in English as *Generation Identity: A Declaration of War against the '68ers*), translated by Dimitris Papageorgiou, a far-right journalist and publisher convicted of a violent attack against antifa activists in Athens in 2010.

house of the same name, which brought out Nazi WWII pamphlets, a work by Julius Evola,²¹ three poetry collections, and the “Declarations of Barcelona” of the neofascist Europe-wide alliance New European Order. The political party followed in February 1983 as Laïkos Syndesmos—Chrysi Avgi (People’s Association—Golden Dawn). In 1984 Michaloliakos suddenly left Greece for some months, allegedly for Latin America, and publications were interrupted. *Chrysi Avgi* resumed publication in early 1987, presumably with improved financing. The magazine doubled its page count to thirty-two and introduced new specialized columns, placing a clear emphasis on sister neo-Nazi organizations from around the globe. By 1989, it had expanded further, increasing its page count to fifty-two, acquiring a color cover in red and black, and even attempting to launch a monthly newspaper titled *Etos Miden* (Year Zero), although this effort was unsuccessful.²²

Golden Dawn focused on publishing, especially during its early years when its activities were rather more ideologically driven than marked by street violence. According to its chronicle, *Politikos Ododeiktis* (Political roadmap), signed by its cofounder Yiannis Perdikaris, who uses the pseudonym Ion Filippou, the period from 1986 to 1990 marked the organization’s “ideological consolidation” (Filippou 2013, 29). In the field of publishing, this resulted in the release of concise yet hardcore neo-Nazi literature. Golden Dawn translated and published the revisionist *The Auschwitz Lie: A Personal Account* by Manfred Roeder and Thies Christophersen in 1988,²³ two works by Povl Heinrich Rus-Knudsen, a leading Danish neo-Nazi and former general secretary of the World Union of National Socialists, in 1989 and 1991,²⁴ and the political manifesto *In Hoc Signo Vinces* by George Lincoln Rockwell, founder of the American Nazi Party, in 1991.

21 A twenty-four-page excerpt from Julius Evola’s collection of essays *Metaphysics of War: Battle, Victory & Death in the World of Tradition* (originally written by Evola during the 1930s and 1940s).

22 The title *Anno Zero* (Year Zero) was first used for an Italian magazine published by Salvatore Francia during the winter and spring of 1974, after the courts banned the neofascist organization Ordine Nuovo.

23 The book, consisting of forty-seven pages, was presented to the public as a translation by the “veteran National Socialist” Aris Arion. It denies the existence of gas chambers in concentration camps and was first published in German in 1974 under the title *Die Auschwitz Lüge*. The cover of the English translation advertises it as “the book that angered the Jews so much they had to invent the film *The Holocaust*.” According to the far-right blog *Mavros Krinos*, Aris Arion maintained a personal friendship with Manfred Roeder until Roeder’s death. Arion was responsible for securing an exclusive interview with Roeder for the magazine *Antidote*. *Mavros Krinos* also reports that Aris Arion left Golden Dawn in 2011, describing it as “an extremely personal-centered neo-conservative bourgeois party.” He currently collaborates with the neo-Nazi Azov regiment in the Russo-Ukrainian War as an “ideology and organization consultant.” “Apokleistiko: Mia apokalyptiki synentefxi me ton synagonisti Ari Arion apo tin Oukrania” [Exclusive: A revealing interview with comrade Aris Arion from Ukraine], *Mavros Krinos*, March 2, 2022 (no longer available), <https://mavros-krinos.blogspot.com/2022/03/azov.html>.

24 These works were *National Socialism: The Biological Worldview* (thirty-one pages), released just two years after its original publication in English in 1987, and *National Socialism: A Left-Wing Movement* (sixteen pages), a brief typewritten pamphlet on the allegedly revolutionary nature of National Socialism.

The prevalence of translated works can be attributed to the historical affiliations that the radical right in Greece has sustained with international movements dating back to the Colonels' dictatorship. When the Greek junta took power in 1967, it quickly established the extremist student association ESESI (National Association of Greek Students in Italy). This organization operated in Italy until 1973 and collaborated closely with the MSI-affiliated FUAN (University Front of National Action) and the neofascist group Ordine Nuovo, led by Pino Rauti (Ferraresi 1969).²⁵ Greek ultranationalist students were not only active in university auditoria but also participated in street violence and conspiracy plans, working together with Italian neofascist terrorist organizations during the Years of Lead (Deliolanes 2019; Varsori 2020, 48–57).²⁶ The ESESI leaders openly declared their ideological affiliations, including national socialism, paganism, and anarchism, while emphasizing their commitment to promoting national socialist power (Koutouzos 1989, 58–59).²⁷ They played a critical role in restructuring the far right in Greece after 1974, assuming the position of spiritual mentors and overseeing far-right political organizations and publishing ventures. Currently, Italian and Greek neofascists still maintain good relations characterized by mutual hospitality, joint public actions, military training, and collaborative efforts aimed at countering perceived “invasions” by immigrants (Tipaldou 2015, 193–220; MacGregor 2023; Giuliani 2023).²⁸

Golden Dawn introduced two music magazines, namely the Greek edition of *Blood & Honour* and *Antepithesi* (Counterattack), marking a significant outreach effort

25 In 1968, ESESI organized a “student trip” to Greece. The entire leadership of Ordine Nuovo and Avanguardia Nazionale and a few dozen of their members participated. They were trained in tactics of infiltration of leftist organizations and state subversion (Deliolanes 2019). The Italian Social Movement (MSI) was descended from Mussolini's National Fascist Party

26 The Years of Lead refers to the armed terrorism that dominated Italy from the late 1960s to early 1980s. The Greek junta, for example, has been linked to the deadly bomb attack in Piazza Fontana in Milan in December 1969. In 1970 the independent research group of the extra-parliamentary left published *La strage di Stato. Controinchiesta* (Rome: Samonà e Savelli, 1970). It points to the neofascist right as the real perpetrators of the bomb attack in Piazza Fontana and implicates the Italian secret services and armed forces, the CIA, NATO, the Vatican, and the Greek junta, which were looking forward to a military emergency government in Italy, following the example of Greece.

27 In a speech at the University Auditorium in Ravenna, George Ventouris, leader of the national socialist tendency of the ESESI, asserted: “We are national socialists . . . we are pagans . . . we are adventurers . . . we are extremists . . . we are also anarchists, and we will be so until the principle of national socialist power prevails” (Koutouzos 1989, 58–59).

28 The youth organization of Golden Dawn and the cells of the neofascist Casa Pound Italia engage in reciprocal hospitality each year during the far-right camps on both sides. Furthermore, in March 2020, a cohort of German far-right activists journeyed to Lesbos in Greece to express solidarity with the islanders and protect Europe's borders against migrants. More recently, on November 1, 2023, twenty-one individuals affiliated with Casa Pound, including their leader, Gianluca Iannone, were apprehended at Athens airport as a precautionary measure. They intended to participate in the pan-European gathering of far-right organizations organized by Golden Dawn youth, which sought to commemorate the tenth anniversary of the murder of two of its members on November 1, 2013.

to engage with the younger generation around the turn of the century. *Blood & Honour Hellas* commenced publication in May 1999 and continued until at least 2014. The first issue appeared in English and featured the statue of Leonidas from Thermopylae on its cover, alongside the inscription “MOLON LAVE! We will never surrender” (for the covers of issues till 2014, see XYZ Contagion 2016).²⁹ *Antepithesi* (Counterattack), published from 2001 to 2010, also centered on musical topics, such as heavy metal, white power music, and the Rock Against Communism concerts, adopting the motto “Against all.” Both magazines were published by Metopo Neolaias (Youth Front), the youth organization of Golden Dawn.

In the early twenty-first century, the extremist right in Greece escalated its action and gained attention for its racist discourse and the violent targeting of immigrants and refugees. According to the Greek National Commission for Human Rights, racist violence did not originate during the economic crisis but rather intensified during that period. The decline in quality of life in urban areas had already begun before the crisis. Once the 2004 Athens Olympics euphoria faded, factors such as the influx of irregular migrants and asylum seekers, the concentrated settlement of these populations in certain areas of the capital under poor living conditions, their difficulty in integrating into society, and the rise in crime rates collectively contributed to the insecurity felt by permanent residents. This situation created room for self-appointed law-and-order groups and citizen protection organizations operating within the extremist right-wing domain, who at times gained the approval of residents and even acceptance from the police (Theofilopoulos 2016, 171).

For Golden Dawn, this environment provided an opportunity to emerge from the political margins, engage in violent racist attacks against immigrants and refugees, and capitalize on a series of unprecedented electoral successes. Neo-Nazi discourse was disseminated primarily through numerous imprints established by Golden Dawn after 2000 (e.g., Helioforos, AGNI, Ascalon, Nea Sparti, GD Katastima, Trimorphos, Apion, Antepithesi, and Logchi) and their respective bookstores.³⁰ Nazi and revisionist literature was translated and published, including works such as *The Second Leuchter Report: Dachau, Mauthausen, Hartheim* by Fred A. Leuchter (Ascalon, 1989, with a foreword by Robert Faurisson) and *Oi Philosophikes Vaseis tou Ethnikosocialismou*

29 On *Blood & Honour*, see note 19. Each national faction within this network produces a magazine bearing the same title, featuring shared articles, a uniform black-and-white aesthetic, and plenty of photographs capturing concerts and rallies. Notably, they employ Nazi symbols and maintain connections with the militant neo-Nazi group known as Combat 18 (“*Blood & Honour*,” n.d.).

30 Several of the imprint names clearly reference ancient Greece and Dodecatheism, such as Helioforos, and Nea Sparti. Others hide more elaborate hints at Hindu mythology (such as Agni, the god of fire) or at antisemitism (like Apion, a grammarian and commentator on Homer from first-century CE Alexandria, who was sent as an ambassador to emperor Caligula to express complaints against the Jews residing in the city.) Another hint at antisemitism is Ascalon, today an Israeli town and a site of a major massacre of Jews during the Roman period.

(available in English as *The Philosophical Foundations of National Socialism*) (Helioforos, 1995) by Otto Dietrich, press chief of the Third Reich. The booklist of this period also contains anti-communist narratives concerning the Greek Civil War, texts by Julius Evola and the French-born Greek fascist and Nazi sympathizer Savitri Devi, and writings by key organization members.³¹

A significant turning point occurred in 2012 when Golden Dawn entered the Greek parliament as the sixth-largest party, with an election campaign centered on security and immigration. This success gave the party nationwide visibility through parliamentary sessions and granted access to state and other political funding. Financial resources allocated to the organization's publishing activities were subsequently increased. During Golden Dawn's parliamentary period, it published the "ideological review" titled *Maiandros* (Meander), issued every two months. This luxury color edition initially consisted of fifty-two pages and later expanded to sixty-eight, replacing the original *Chrysi Avgi* magazine. Furthermore, a new party newspaper, *Embros* (Forward), was launched weekly on Saturdays "to serve as a voice for every Greek patriot and to expose truths concealed or distorted by mainstream media" (Michaloliakos 2013). Golden Dawn initiated even more publishing ventures, such as Popular Nationalist Publications, which reproduced previously published texts by other Golden Dawn imprints, and Diotima, which only released two titles. The party's parliamentary foundation, AEGIS, also produced costly volumes, including collective works, conference minutes, and works authored by party members—all characterized by an ultranationalist orientation and rather thin content. In total, around 110 publications have been attributed to Golden Dawn from 1980 onward, with the majority (96) published between 2000 and 2021. These works featured mainly antisemitic, Nazi, and neo-Nazi themes, along with pseudoscientific studies on ancient Sparta and geopolitical analyses of Russia and Turkey. On average, about four books were published yearly, often with the same titles appearing under different imprints. This considerable publishing activity with minimal actual output raises concerns about potential money laundering.

Among the imprints managed by Golden Dawn, one continues to operate independently: Logchi (Spear) was established in 2000, originally functioning as a nationalist bookstore situated in central Athens. Publication activities commenced in 2002 under the leadership of Dimitris Zafeiropoulos, Ioannis Drakos, and Michalis Georgilas. At the same time, Logchi introduced an online bookstore—an innovative business venture within the Greek book market during that period. Besides Nazi and neo-Nazi books, Logchi offered various items for sale that featured extremist symbols

31 The organization also published literary works, such as the 1996 *To Mystiko tou Kochyliou* (The secret of the seashell), authored by Antonis Androutsopoulos, also known as "Periander," the deputy leader of Golden Dawn. This novel, promoted by the *Mavros Krinos* blogspot as "a significant contribution to the revival of the Greek historical novel genre," explores the awakening of Greek consciousness in a village in Asia Minor during the fifteenth century, a time marked by atrocities, massacres, and ethnic conflicts. The narrative emphasizes the Greek struggle against various groups, with a particular focus on the Jews.

and references, like Nazi marching band CDs, video cassettes of Ku Klux Klan songs, military unit badges, historical flags, T-shirts, and replicas of historical weapons. In April 2003, Logchi extended its repertoire by reissuing the WWII magazine *Sinthima* (Signal) as part of their “WWII Documents” series.³²

The first title published by Logchi was *O Kokkinos Varonos* (available in English as *The Red Battle Flyer*) (2002, 144 pages), the autobiography of the leading German pilot of World War I, Manfred von Richthofen. Today it has over a hundred titles in its booklist and brings out about fifteen new titles each year with print runs between one hundred and five hundred copies. Top-selling titles are books on the Greek Civil War with an anti-communist perspective, as well as works by Evola and Dominique Venner. Since October 2016, Logchi has published the nationalist magazine *Anaktisis* (Reconquest), appearing twice a month; its title references the Catholic Reconquista of Spain that ended in 1492. Additionally, since 2019, it has maintained an information channel on YouTube named “Hellenic Free Television.” Some typical articles in *Anaktisis* are “Apostoli stin Oukrania sto archigeio toy Azov” (Mission to Ukraine at the Azov headquarters) (issue 1, October–November 2016); “Mnimi Robert Brasillach” (Memory of Robert Brasillach) (issue 2, March 2017); “O Taftotismos kai I Megali Antikatastasi” (Identitarianism and the Great Replacement) (issue 5, November 2017); “Antidراسi sta chronia tou coronoiou” (Reaction during the years of the coronavirus) (issue 6, July 2020); “To manifesto tis post-COVID epochis” (The manifesto of the post-COVID era) (issue 7, June 2021); and “Céline, enas ethnofyletistis gigantاس tis logotechnias” (Céline, a nationalist giant of literature) (issue 8, November 2021).

In both *Anaktisis*’s repertoire and Logchi’s booklist, a renewed concentration on topics aligned with the European far right can be noticed, involving the exploration of European identity (white and Christian), the presence of Islam in Europe, and concerns regarding multiculturalism. This development reconnects with earlier themes observed in Eleftheri Skepsis under Andreas Dendrinος. The alignment with extremist movements internationally coincides with the economic downturn instigated by the European Union’s economic adjustment programs for Greece, which began in 2010. The prolonged crisis allowed the far right to emerge as an alternative to the established system. Greek supremacy narratives subsided, leading to a more inclusive approach and alliances with foreign extremist groups (Goulas, Kallandranis, and Zervoyianni 2019, 18–19; Angouri and Wodak 2014; for an approach considering the rise of Golden Dawn as the result of a broader democratic crisis in Greece, see Vasilopoulou and Halikiopoulou 2015, 79–83).

32 *Signal* was a propaganda magazine appearing twice a month produced by the German occupation authorities during WWII. Its purpose was to bolster the German war effort, attract supporters for the establishment of the Nazi “New Europe,” and justify German hegemony in Europe by highlighting the threat of Bolshevism. It was published from April 1940 to April 1945, emphasizing photojournalism with color photographs. It circulated in identical versions in over twenty languages, reaching about 2.5 million copies. I have traced four issues published by Logchi, up to June 2003.

The increasingly European orientation is evident in the publishing initiatives of Thouli (Thule) and Edelweiss, established in 2010 by Fotis Xirocostas, a former member and parliamentary candidate of Golden Dawn, as well as in Nea Genea and Hector Publications, founded in 2017 by Alexandros Karras, a trained nutritionist. It reflects a renewed connection with their international counterparts and an increased focus on publishing translated works, particularly by authors such as Julius Evola, Alain de Benoist, and Alexander Dugin. Notably, Thouli and Edelweiss specialize in extremist right literature, including works related to historical revisionism, racism, Nazism, and neo-Nazism. Alongside familiar names such as Hitler, Goebbels, Brasillach, Evola, and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, their authors are Philipp Bouhler (1899–1945, a high-ranking SS officer responsible for the euthanasia program), Louis Beam (born in 1946, an icon of the American radical right, member of the Ku Klux Klan, and proponent of white supremacy and the strategy of “leaderless resistance”),³³ George Lincoln Rockwell (1918–1967, founder of the American Nazi Party),³⁴ Hans Kläui (1906–1992, a Swiss historian and a Nazi), and Sitsa Karaïskaki (1902–1987, a Greek writer who studied philosophy in Nazi Germany and became one of the main propagandists in Ioannis Metaxas’s regime).³⁵ Fotis Xirokostas also runs the website Ristorante Verona for his e-sales, which references the neofascist movement in Italy and the Golden Dawn party (Hasapopoulos 2013, 12).³⁶ Xirokostas is among the surprisingly few publishers that release works with Islamophobic content, as in the case of Panagiotis Marinis’s *Evropi kai Islam* (Europe and Islam, 2018) and Christos Tsiachris’s *Minaredes—Oi loghes tou Islam stin Evropi* (Minarets—The spears of Islam in Europe, 2014).³⁷

33 Louis Beam, *Akefali antistasi* [Leaderless resistance] (Edelweiss, 2012, 30 pages). See also “Louis Beam,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed February 28, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/individual/louis-beam>.

34 George Lincoln Rockwell, *White Power* (Edelweiss, 2012). The work was published in two formats: in four separate volumes and in a single binding (880 pages). In 2018, Nea Genea published a Greek translation of his biography by William Pierce, *George Lincoln Rockwell: O vios enos ethnikosialisti* (first published in English as *George Lincoln Rockwell: The Life of a National Socialist*) (165 pages).

35 See “Sitsa Karaïskaki,” Metaxas Project, December 19, 2014, <https://metaxas-project.com/sitsa-karaiskaki/>.

36 The website was named after Ristorante di Verona, in the Plaka neighborhood of Athens, which was a meeting place for Nikos Michaloliakos and his organization during the planning phase of Golden Dawn. The restaurant was initially established by Elio Massagrande and Clemente Graziani, Italian neofascists linked to the Ordine Nuovo, who were wanted by the Italian authorities for their involvement in terrorist activities. They were eventually deported to Italy at the request of the Italian justice system (Hasapopoulos 2013, 12). The website is currently available only to subscribers (<https://ristorante-verona.blogspot.com/>).

37 The appointment of Tsiachris as commander of the refugee camp at Pyrgos in May 2020 raised concerns, leading to criticism directed at the publishing house Thouli, which opposition parties and the press labeled a “Nazi publishing house.” See, for example, “Synergátis nazistikón ekdóseon kai syngraféas akrodexioú vivliou o néos dioikitís tis prosfygikís domís tou Pýrgou” [The new governor of the refugee structure in Pyrgos is a collaborator of Nazi publications and author of a far-right book], *tvxs.gr*, May

Alexandros Karras, born in 1985, founded a website, a YouTube channel, and three publishing brands—Nea Genea (New Generation), Hector, and Nymphios—all in 2017. He has published more than 160 titles, including fifteen of his own works. He is known for publishing translations of earlier authoritarian and fascist ideologues. Translated authors include Hitler, Mussolini, Brasillach, Goebbels, Evola, Maurice Barrès, Corneliu Zelea Codreanu, Horia Sima, Oswald Mosley, Houston Stewart Chamberlain, José Antonio Primo de Rivera, Otto Strasser, and Alfred Rosenberg. Karras defends his publications by claiming to address a gap in the historical literature of the interwar period. However, it is noteworthy that his catalog also includes more recent extremist texts, such as William Pierce’s biography of George Lincoln Rockwell (see note 34) and the 2016 manifesto of the Swedish neo-Nazi organization Nordic Resistance Movement.³⁸ Additionally, he repeatedly adopted emblems with a striking resemblance to Ioannis Metaxas’s insignia and Klaus Armstroff’s symbol for the German neo-Nazi party Der Dritte Weg (The Third Way).

Distinct Book Market Practices

Publications that cultivate a public image as “militant” are those independent publications representing marginalized, activist, and underground movements, as well as those aligning with resistance against political power, commercialization, and the globalization of the publishing industry. Previous scholarly interest has predominantly focused on left-wing publishers like Giangiacomo Feltrinelli and François Maspero, resistance houses during World War II such as Editions de Minuit, and avant-garde houses like Editions du Seuil. The presence and significance of right-wing and far-right publishing houses are often overlooked, despite the general recognition that activism and confrontational action have increasingly shifted toward the right since 1990 (Perrineau 1998, 113–14; Noël 2016).

Far-right publishing activities create a platform for generating ideas, written materials, and literary works following principles and operation rules that diverge from conventional trade book production. My research has shown that this sector operates independently of mainstream distribution and promotion channels, depending instead on special networks, which are often confidential and accessible only to partisans. Additionally, there is a notable geographical dispersion of production, with publishers located outside Athens, in Thessaloniki and smaller towns such as Lamia, Ioannina,

22, 2020, <https://rb.gy/olg3vq>; “Akrodexiós dioikitís se domí prosfýgon—Synergázetai me ekdotikó oíko pou ekdídei nazistiká vivlíá” [Far-right governor in a refugee structure—He collaborates with a publishing house that publishes Nazi books], *in.gr*, May 22, 2020, <https://rb.gy/gxo0k3>.

38 Nordic Resistance Movement, *Our Path: New Politics for a New Time* (2018 in Greek translation, 106 pages). The NRM was founded in 1997 and operates in Sweden, Finland, Norway, and Denmark, with a history of terrorist attacks and paramilitary activity.

Kalamata, Areopoli, and Alexandroupoli, contrary to the traditional concentration of the book trade in Athens. This network demonstrates resilience and dynamism, despite being overlooked and frequently devalued by mainstream media and traditional distinctions such as literary awards, book reviews, and interviews with the authors.

Publishers within this domain challenge the established political order and conventional academic knowledge. They operate within an alternative system rooted in Hellenocentric nationalism while consistently incorporating elements of anti-communism, anti-Americanism, antisemitism, and xenophobia. The targeting and contrarian nature of the far-right publishing field spans multiple dimensions:

- providing information that challenges or presents an alternative perspective to what far-right publishers view as misinformation spread by mainstream media.
- engaging in propaganda to promote and defend the positions of the extreme and nationalist right, while countering the arguments of their opponents.
- providing an alternative analysis of Greece's history by highlighting aspects considered overlooked or misrepresented.
- promoting cultural references via political essays and literary texts linked to a "patriotic front," often by asserting ownership of specific works and authors to protect the nationalist heritage (Petrocik, Benoit, and Hansen 2003).

The Goal Outweighs Profits

Publishers linked to far-right and nationalist ideologies navigate a complex interplay of culture and politics. Their role goes beyond managing a business centered on producing and distributing scholarly or literary works. Additional considerations that stem from their political and ideological perspectives influence the content of their catalogs, the timing of their publications, their partnerships, and their promotional strategies. Unlike trade publishers, whose main goals are the survival and profitability of their businesses, politically engaged publishers view these goals as tools to support collective action, participate in political activities, and promote activism. This can be considered a defining characteristic that differentiates politically engaged publishing from trade publishing.

This characteristic is reinforced by the fact that, in Greece, authors—and this applies generally and not only to "patriotic" books—seem to be skeptical of the possibilities offered by the Internet for fast and economical self-publishing through specialized electronic platforms such as Amazon's Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP), which emerged as a very fertile and lucrative space for the development of extremist ideas on a global scale (Kofman, Tseng, and Weigel 2020; Hood and Boucher 2022).³⁹ While some Greek titles are available through Amazon, self-publishing by Greek nationalist or far-right authors is uncommon.

³⁹ The retail price of e-books on Amazon ranges between US\$2.99 and US\$9.99, and authors receive 70 percent of the profits (Kofman, Tseng, and Weigel 2020).

Greek authors generally depend on publishers to handle their work, with publishers bearing the publication costs. In this niche market, authors often waive royalties in exchange for complimentary copies of their books as compensation.⁴⁰

Prioritization of the Message over Quality of the Medium

The book market under examination is characterized by political commitment and a strong sense of “national mission,” where the content is prioritized over print quality. The militant nature of the content often compromises the appearance of these books, which are frequently rushed out under pressure due to the urgency of current affairs and limited resources. Publishers in this field usually engage in the book business as a secondary occupation and income source, alongside careers in bookselling, journalism, law, politics, and more. Thus, most of their books lack thorough editing, even elementary proofreading. Their primary aim is to fulfill an urgent political mission of national awakening and patriotic alarm, rather than focus on intellectual advancement, aesthetic enjoyment, or entertainment for the reader. It is important to note that a book’s physical appearance and material features significantly impact the reading experience. Elements such as size, weight, pagination, printing and paper quality, binding, illustrations, and the cover serve as independent variables framing the reception of the content.⁴¹

Greek far-right books generally have inferior presentation compared to the quality and care typical of corresponding works on the international market. This disparity can be partly attributed to available resources and the scale of operations. They are typically published in standard trade book format (21x14 cm, up to 120 pages) with glued binding and soft cover. They are printed on low-quality paper with large fonts and wide margins, possibly to accommodate older readers or create an illusion of substantial content. The covers are often glossy and feature vibrant colors, primarily adorned with illustrations that are either photographs or reproductions of older prints. Moreover, books are occasionally distributed without proper identification, possibly to evade copyright infringement or legal consequences.

Protection of the Niche Market

In the far-right subculture, it is understood that book production is intended for a community of like-minded individuals who reject or at least distrust established knowledge and culture, and seek alternative analysis and guidance. It does not target unsuspecting passersby with an attractive presentation but operates within a niche market. This I consider the third characteristic of far-right book production: it satisfies a specific segment of consumers/readers who actively seek specific products/books. The advantages of this type of market are that publishers operate protected

40 Author’s interviews with Ioannis Yannakenas (Athens, August 31, 2021), Dimosthenis Koukounas (Athens, May 30, 2022), and Konstantinos Tsopanis (Athens, May 19, 2022).

41 The investigation into the interplay between the materiality of books and the experience of reading has predominantly focused on the context of schooling and the acquisition of reading skills. Nevertheless, there is an expanding corpus of academic literature examining printed books and comparing them with their digital counterparts (Chartier 2004; Cuiñas and Vailati 2022).

from the fierce competition of the free market (they are the only ones who offer this product) and they develop personal trust with their customers, which in our case, due to their strong political orientation, is of particular significance. The prevailing ideological engagement fosters strong cooperation and solidarity among publishers and booksellers, ensuring all titles are prominently displayed in every far-right brick-and-mortar bookstore and online. Books are printed and distributed throughout Greece by specialized networks and bookstores, as well as through party offices, local book fairs, and secondhand booksellers. As a rule, general bookstores do not display ultranationalist, extremist, or antisemitic titles. However, these are kept in stock and customers may ask for them or make their purchases through e-sales. Teleshopping serves as an additional sales channel. It guarantees accessibility and discretion for customers all over Greece and abroad. On private TV channels, books are sold in bundles, heavily discounted (or so it is claimed) and available exclusively through television broadcasts. Furthermore, publishers extend their outreach by participating in local book fairs and annual nationalist events, reaching a wider circle of buyers and readers.

Most publications are by Greek authors. Far-right and nationalist publishing draws extensively from a specific pool of predominantly male writers who are self-described “Greek patriots.” Many are retired military personnel (with active members using pseudonyms), journalists, or retired teachers. They often feature on diverse media platforms, transitioning between publishing houses, newspapers, and blogs. While authorship can be traced, reliable information on readership is lacking. There are no sales numbers or market surveys available for this segment of the book market. It can be inferred that there is some overlap between readers and far-right voters; however, due to the increasing mainstreaming of far-right ideas, the readership also includes a broader audience of consumers (Vasilaki and Souvlis 2021).

Ideas and opinions within this sphere circulate in a closed loop, a self-reinforcing feedback mechanism. Issues in history, archaeology, or linguistics are extensively deliberated, often eliciting passionate discussion, albeit always outside of specialized academic settings. Such debates can be seen as a form of public history, fostering a connection with the past and integrating it into the present, often in contemporary terms. It involves community and identity formation and bypasses academic historiography. Historical interpretations produced in this context are molded to suit present-day needs and are indifferent to whether they align with scientific accuracy or historical methodology. “National-patriotic” publishing promotes a representation of the past dealing with issues that are considered either inadequately covered or not examined through the “correct” perspective of nationalist ideology. Topics include the location of ancient Atlantis, the technological advancements of the ancient Greeks, or the events surrounding the “betrayal of Cyprus” in 1974.

A Distinct Publishing Field

This brings us to the fourth special feature of nationalist and far-right publishing houses and bookstores: their positioning outside the field of general trade publishers. According to Pierre Bourdieu's model, the publishing space constitutes a structured field, wherein each publisher's position is determined by their capital (financial, symbolic, commercial, technical, etc.) and their power within the field, thus shaping identity and strategy (Bourdieu 1999, 3–4). The publishing houses studied within the far-right context conform with the dominant model in the Greek book market in that they are typically small family businesses. However, they do not vie for a better position in the mainstream market. Instead, they have carved out a unique niche, fostering an autonomous and self-sufficient subculture. Despite being systematically ignored by the broader book market, with their production not included in statistics and their books not cataloged in public and municipal libraries or featured in mainstream book reviews, these publishers remain active for generations. Since 1974, a closed book circuit has developed, encompassing the entire processes of writing, production, distribution, promotion, and sales. To provide a comprehensive overview, one must also consider the role of print and digital magazines within this field, which foster a community of ideas and actions, as well as the constantly evolving landscape of blogs that, despite occasional court bans, effectively disseminate extremist neo-Nazi tendencies and the emerging alt-right ideology in Greece.

Constant Renewal

The fifth and final characteristic of the far-right and nationalist space is the continual influx of new forces. The market consistently welcomes new publishers and writers, enhancing book quality with superior typography and diverse themes, including works from the American alt-right, neo-Nazi texts, and nationalist literature from lesser-known movements.⁴² These emerging ventures are driven by younger editors who, while lacking the political background of their predecessors, bring a keen awareness of international trends and expertise in new media. They upgrade publishing catalogs with translations and original works, reviving connections and networks that appeared long dormant. Logchi, for example, recently restored its collaboration with the Institut Iliade, described by *Le Monde* as “the heir of GRECE” (Soullier 2019), and published Armand Berger's *Tolkien, Europe, and Tradition: From Civilisation to the Dawn of Imagination* in 2023, only a few months after its first circulation in English and in French. Moreover, I identified numerous groups of students and young people across Greece involved in diverse publishing activities. These can be found in Lamia (Lykoreia),

⁴² Exodos, for instance, introduced the Greek public to the Mexican political analyst Adriano Erriguel with seven books, and to the Finnish revolutionary nationalist philosopher Kai Murros. They also published six titles by Ted Kaczynski, known as the “Unabomber.”

Ioannina (Oinoiades), and in Athens (Flefalo). The first two focus on translating and publishing books, both online and in print, primarily centered on Julius Evola. The third was established as a fantasy literature student fan club, adopting the slogan “Neither Enlightenment nor Postmodernism,” publishing traditionalist and gothic literature, and actively participating in nationalist gatherings. They all fit into Roger Griffin’s concept of the “groupuscular right.” They are largely autonomous grouplets that form “an amorphous, leaderless and centreless cellular network of political ideology, organization and activism” (Griffin 2003, 27).

Conclusion

Exploring the material the far right produces, manages, and consumes allows us to grasp better the “different and competing understandings of what is real and the means by which we can know what is real, and of what is good and true and the means by which we can know these things” (Hunter 2006, 15). This article examines the ties between publishing and the far-right project of cultural and political renewal in Greece within the framework of book history. It traces the shift since 1974 from an inward-focused Greek far right (celebrating Greekness as the progenitor of all things great in the world, and denigrating those who hide this supposed truth) to an embrace, especially since 2000, of themes common to the European far right. It emphasizes the early focus on achieving cultural dominance for far-right ideologies, highlighting the rise of Golden Dawn within the context of far-right Greek publishing. This is reinforced by the fact that Golden Dawn started as a publishing venture in the early 1980s.

For decades, the Greek ultranationalist far-right political sphere endorsed national exceptionalism and superiority. Greece’s ancient origin and unique language supported a narrative of the “chosen people,” even reaching an extreme claim about Greeks’ supposed extraterrestrial origins. Currently, international far-right issues are being integrated into the domestic political landscape, utilizing arguments formulated across borders and expressing concerns over the Great Replacement, the threat of “world governance,” and woke culture. Although some of the main features of far-right rhetoric remain unchanged—such as hostility to the ideas of equality and democracy—others, such as authoritarianism, nativism, and anti-immigration discourse, together with the anti-vaccination movement and gender issues, are emerging as new fields of consolidation (Campos 2023). The Greek neoconservative and neo-orthodox version of the alt-right calls for the fight “against dangerous schoolbooks of language, history, and religion, as well as the alleged sexual indoctrination” (Natsios 2023). For the first time, we are witnessing right-wing extremists in Greece who “no longer subscribe to the narrow concept of nationalism but instead imagine themselves as participants in a global struggle against a global enemy” (Musharbash 2021). Furthermore, recent observations

indicate a trend toward radical editorial choices through revived network connections.⁴³ Exchanges of hospitality and common celebrations and operations between Golden Dawn and Casa Pound Italia, as well as between Golden Dawn and neo-Nazi German organizations, document a closer relationship than simple copyright agreements (Lavelle 2023; Tipaldou 2015).

My research has identified the market for far-right and nationalist books in Greece as a distinct sector within the country's publishing industry. There are no statistical data for its annual turnover since they are not included in book market studies and book production is distributed through parallel channels (party offices, hand-to-hand transactions, specialized and secondhand bookstores) rather than the usual trade book outlets. Moreover, production functions as a "closed loop" with dynamics distinct from those of the mainstream book market, and this sets it apart from standard market monitors. However, the enduring success of publishing houses over nearly fifty years, coupled with the production of more than four thousand titles and the constant emergence of new publishers despite a prolonged economic crisis and the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, clearly highlights the sector's dynamism and vitality. Even as digital media, blogs, and memes gain prominence, print culture and physical books remain influential, adeptly navigating legal sanctions and hate speech restrictions. The significant activity of publishing houses in this field, coupled with the growing number of younger people identifying as "patriots" or "nationalists," indicates a dynamic trend that deserves attention (Laliouti 2020).

Publishers have been compared to "cultural warriors who generate and organize resources" for activist organizations and political factions (Hunter 2006, 28). Their influence on far-right militant counterculture is fully acknowledged within the field. Moreover, their capacity to shape issues through publishing choices is increasingly infusing mainstream society with far-right ideology (Bures 2020, 33; Vasilaki and Souvlis 2021). The Greek case thus exemplifies a broader cultural shift within the far right, and this study emphasized the ideologies, internal cultures, and dynamics of these movements, moving beyond the perspective of viewing them merely as reactionary forces.

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43 In 2022, Logchi published *I Dialysi tou Systimatos*, a translation of the 1969 work *The Disintegration of the System* by the leading neofascist intellectual and publisher Franco Freda. Between 2022 and 2024, Nea Genea published three books by Claudio Mutti, the Italian neofascist who converted to Islam. In 2024, Exodos published an excerpt of *Technological Slavery* by Ted Kaczynski (*Enantia stin Technologiki Douleia*) and an essay on his philosophy by Chad A. Haag, *I Philosophia tou Ted Kaczynski: Giati o Unabomber Eiche Dikio gia tin Sychroni Technologia* (originally *The Philosophy of Ted Kaczynski: Why the Unabomber Was Right about Modern Technology*).

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“Based” Bookishness*White Nationalist Strategies for a Post-Print Age*

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If you have spent time in far-right social media, you have likely seen the #ReadSiege hashtag, a reference to *Siege*, a collection of essays written by neo-Nazi James Mason and first published in 1992. After gaining renewed popularity in the mid-2010s thanks to groups like The Base and Atomwaffen Division, *Siege* is now widely regarded as “a kind of neo-Nazi bible” and one of “the most venerated postwar works among neo-Nazis” (Johnson and Feldman 2023, 5). Of course, it is hard to say how many *Siege* fans have actually read the book. Thick as a phone book and packed with disorganized ramblings, *Siege* is far from light reading. Finding physical copies of the book can also be a challenge, with available copies easily costing over a hundred dollars. Perhaps this explains sentiments like those of far-right user “Monsieur le Baron,” who writes that you can “always tell who the leftist and Fed infiltrators [are] because they read *Siege*. Nobody reads *Siege*, man” (2024).

It is easy to see why someone might believe (almost) nobody reads *Siege*, given that the memes and hype surrounding it vastly overshadow substantial discussions of its content. Yet, even if few readers manage to actually get through the text, this does not seem to affect the overwhelming number of “*Siege* selfies” that flood social media spaces. In these images, users display physical copies of *Siege* in curated settings, often alongside Nazi flags, firearms, and other extremist symbols, or feature themselves holding the book while obscuring their faces with masks or bandanas. Other images feature fictional characters and photoshopped celebrities (like Donald Trump) holding *Siege*, echoing the real-life selfies they imitate (figure 1).

The phenomenon of *Siege* selfies is an example of what Jessica Pressman calls *bookishness*: “acts that engage the physicality of the book within a digital culture, in modes that may be sentimental, fetishistic, radical” (2020, 1). Scholars like Katherine Hayles have highlighted how our current “post-print” era has led to a reevaluation of physical books and their new social uses, emphasizing the ways in which digital culture reshapes our engagement with these artifacts (2021). Hayles notes that “post-print” does not signify a division between print and digital media but instead points to their entanglements, which foster new forms of expression. Likewise, Garrett Stewart argues that the rise of digital media grants physical books a new kind of rhetorical currency,

even in their digitally mediated appearance. Stewart describes bookishness as an aestheticization and fetishization of books as artifacts, making the physical book more of what he terms a *bibliobject*: an object whose primary form of transmission becomes undone, “blocked or altered, in the medium of its secondary presentation” (2011, 1). Thus, as we see in the bookish example of *Siege* selfies, the physical book takes on meaning and value independent of the words it contains.



Figure 1. Examples of “*Siege* selfies.”¹

Several scholars have begun examining how such bookishness informs popular practices like “BookTubing,” “bookshelf tours,” “shelf threads,” and “shelfies.” Dorothee Birke and Johannes Fehrle, for example, explore the video genre of BookTubing, where content creators “hold the book they discuss in their hand and show it to the camera repeatedly.” Such BookTubers limit themselves to “commenting only on special features (e.g., an illustrated copy or a collector’s edition)” (2018, 74, 81). Admeire da Silva Santos Sundström has written about the similar video genre of the bookshelf tour, where creators “produce videos [that] . . . showcase their bookshelves and explain the reasons behind their book purchases” (2023). Relatedly, bookish practices like shelfies, a genre Nicola Rodger cheekily calls “bookshelf porn,” often feature carefully curated images of users’ bookshelf contents for online audiences (2019). As these and other scholars have noted, such bookish acts reflect ways in which digitally mediated displays of physical books can facilitate new forms of interaction by taking on new kinds of rhetorical currency.

However, while mainstream bookish practices have begun to attract scholarly attention, there has been little inquiry into their function within far-right spaces. For this reason, I offer this brief essay as an examination of current bookishness in White

1 From left to right, photos are from: Anonymous, 4chan /pol/ (archived on 4plebs), December 27, 2023, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/453188100/#453188100>; Anonymous, 4chan /pol/ (archived on 4plebs), December 18, 2020, <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/297420863/#297423117>; Image of Feuerkrieg Division member “Bauruk” taken from the group’s leaked chats, reposted by Unicorn Riot, March 20, 2020, <https://unicornriot.ninja/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Bauruk-siege-selfie-FKD.png>.

nationalist rhetorics. Although my observations here are far from an exhaustive inquiry, I want to call attention to how these practices cultivate and sustain a form of ideological genericism, making White nationalist rhetoric more accessible to a broader audience. In what follows, I examine two specific bookish phenomena—shelf threads and bookshelf tour videos—that are popular in spaces like 4chan and Bitchute. Like other forms of bookishness, these practices engage with the physicality of books within a digital culture but focus specifically on *based books*. In digital far-right discourse, “based” has come to signify endorsement of extremist ideas, serve as a marker of ideological defiance, and indicate rejection of so-called “woke” culture. I therefore use *based books* to broadly refer to books that circulate within these networks, particularly in the digital spaces I explore in this essay. While this is not a comprehensive examination, I share these observations to highlight the importance of further investigating how platform affordances, post-print practices, and the changing landscape of ideological discourse intersect in the digital age.

“What are we reading today, /pol/?”

When I first started researching shelf threads on the 4chan /pol/ board, I came across a 2018 post that appeared to be just another ordinary (albeit White nationalist) iteration of the shelf threads I had seen on mainstream social media. On one hand, it contained the basic elements typical of a shelf thread: a picture of the user’s bookshelf and a question about what others are currently reading. Shelf threads often begin this way, followed by comments on the original poster’s books and additional photos of other users’ shelves. The opening post reads:

Hey /pol/ what are you currently reading or planning to add to your library? Here’s a picture of my JQ shelf, I have hundreds of books and am currently trying to organize them by subject. I also have dozens more books on the crimes, illegitimacy and influence of Israel but that will be a separate shelf. This is just a tiny portion of my library, but I’m trying to amass as much literature on the Jews as possible since Amazon has begun purging holocaust revisionist and “anti-Semitic.” (Anonymous 2017)²

Beside the post is a picture of the author’s “JQ” shelf (a not-so-subtle antisemitic dog whistle referencing the “Jewish question”), featuring books by David Duke, Henry Ford’s *The International Jew*, Holocaust denier Andrew Carrington Hitchcock’s *Synagogue of Satan*, and several other equally virulently antisemitic books (figure 2).³ In response,

2 All posts are reproduced here as they originally appeared, unedited for grammar or spelling.

3 Threads on 4chan are started when someone makes an initial post, often called the “original post” (or just “OP”), and then other users reply. Because of 4chan’s image-oriented platform, every OP must include an image. Responses can include images, though this is not a requirement.

While I found myself initially asking *why* these photos were being reposted in such unusual ways, I realized that I first needed to answer a different question: what are these photos *doing*? To delve deeper into this question, I analyzed sixty-five repeated photographs from /pol/ shelf threads archived online. I chose photos that featured stacks of far-right books that had been reposted at least ten times across threads over a period of two months or more. By examining the frequency and context of each photo's reappearance, I looked for patterns that might shed light on their purpose and impact.

One of the duplicate photos I examined shows a worn copy of Gary Smith's antisemitic book *Land of the ZOG*, positioned slightly askew on a wooden table.⁶ The photo first appeared on November 23, 2021, in a generic /pol/ thread titled "Reading recommendations."⁷ In the original post, the user mentioned enjoying books by a certain sci-fi author and asked fellow anons for similar recommendations. Within twenty-four hours, the thread accumulated three hundred comments, mostly debating the merits of various sci-fi and fantasy books. In the middle of this discussion, an anonymous user posted the *Land of the ZOG* photo without any explanation. Seconds later, the same user posted additional images showing the book's back cover and table of contents.

Since that first post, the same image has reappeared at least forty-four times across various /pol/ threads, with the most recent instance in January 2025 (figure 3). Typically, the image is posted without comment and is often followed by an image of the back cover, table of contents, or both. The threads where this image resurface range from explicitly White nationalist threads with titles like "Redpill Reading List" and "NS/Fascism Essential Literature" to more generic discussions, such as "Book Thread Recommendations and Discussion."



Figure 3. Comments on /pol/ threads from November 2021 (left) and January 2025 (right).⁸

6 ZOG refers to the phrase "Zionist Occupied Government," a common term among antisemites and conspiracy theorists alike to reference what is perceived to be Jewish control of the US government.

7 All 4chan posts using this image's unique hash can be found archived at <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/349162586/#349181809> (accessed May 25, 2025).

8 All 4chan posts using this image's unique hash can be found archived at <https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/image/fYxhQKoyI95nlW5GQRdJLA/> (accessed May 25, 2025).

Another commonly reposted photo first appeared in a shelf thread from March 2018 titled “Does /pol/ read books?”⁹ The image featured a stack of books by Charles Murray, coauthor of *The Bell Curve* and author of numerous other works promoting scientific racism, and by far-right activist Milo Yiannopoulos (figure 4). This same image was reused as the header image for eighteen separate threads over seven months, between March and October 2018. It appeared on threads with subject lines like “Book Club,” “Book Club for Intelligent Young White Men,” “Book Stack Thread,” “Book Club General,” and “Book Club Thread.” The introductory text for each thread was nearly identical, with only minor (yet revealing) variations in wording:

ITT [in this thread]: We post our literature stacks, things we’ve been reading recently. I recently went oon a bit of an Amazon binge and I’m really looking forward to using my spring break to further my education. Post your stacks, rate, and recommend. (March 9, 2018)

What are you reading, pol? I got ahead of myself on Amazon and bought a big stack of books for summer. I’ve been taking advantage of the nice weather to go outside and catch up. So, post your stacks, rate, and recommend. (May 16, 2018)

What are you reading, pol? I got ahead of myself on Amazon and bought a big stack of books for winter. I’ve been taking advantage of the nice weather to go outside and catch up. So, post your stacks, rate, and recommend. (October 2, 2018)

In October 2018, the bookstack image went dormant on /pol/, not showing up in any threads until it suddenly resurfaced on March 24, 2020, as the opening image of a new thread. Once again, the opening post narrative sounded strangely familiar, with a few new edits tossed in.

I hope you guys are spending your quarantine time wisely. Pic related is what I treated myself to a couple of weeks ago in preparation for this moment. I’m about a quarter of the way through Murray and enjoying it immensely.

Whether or not the 2020 poster (someone who claimed to have just purchased the books for quarantine reading) was the same as the 2018 poster (someone who claimed to have bought the books for a spring break and/or summertime reading binge) is probably impossible to determine. What is more, such questions of provenance and origin are less important than the question of what these posts are *doing* in these spaces.

9 All 4chan posts using this image’s unique hash can be found archived at https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/image/iSkYG00bGK_Mywm1V3uazg/ (accessed May 25, 2025).



Figure 4. Original posts from October 2018 (bottom) and March 2020 (top).

One answer to this became clear as I tracked an image that has appeared at least fifty-six times across /pol/ shelf threads from 2017 to 2025.¹⁰ The image features a bookshelf prominently displaying *Barbarians*, a 2016 book by the far-right activist Lauren Southern, a figure who regularly uses her popular social media channels to promote the Great Replacement and White genocide conspiracy theories. This particular image is notable not only for its frequent reposting but also for how often it appears as the opening post in new shelf threads.

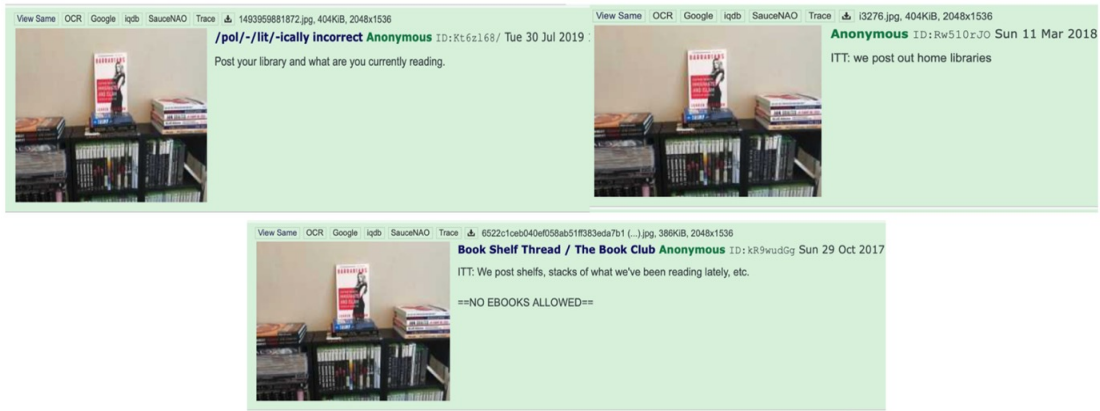


Figure 5. Original /pol/ headers from October 2017 to July 2019.

Over seven years, the style and tone of these initial posts vary slightly, but the similarities are far more striking. In a generally “polite” tone, each post invites users to share their own book recommendations and photos in the comments:

What’s some good /pol/-approved and redpilled literature? Pic related is my collection currently, looking to add more to it. (July 14, 2017)

¹⁰ All 4chan posts using this image’s unique hash can be found archived at: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/search/image/zy3gLBpWmmLaBPW_em6UOw/ (accessed May 25, 2025).

What books does /pol/ recommend to read? Pic related is my collection so far (February 7, 2018)

Book Club Thread! In this general thread, we post pictures of our book shelves/ recently read stacks, share recommendations, and talk about books. I'm curating something of a collection second-hand, amazon is surprisingly good for this purpose (March 2, 2018)

Pic related is my collection, any recommendations for further redpilled books? (November 26, 2017)

Post your library and what you are currently reading. (July 30, 2019)

What are you reading today, /pol/? Feel free to post shelves or stacks. (October 7, 2018)

ITT: we post our home libraries (March 11, 2018)

ITT: We post shelves, stacks of what we've been reading lately, etc. (October 29, 2017)

Book shelf thread! Post your bookshelves or, just the stack of books you've been reading. Rate, discuss, and recommend (October 20, 2017)

What's some essential /pol/ literature? Pic related, my library (October 21, 2017)

Regardless of whether a single person is actually reposting their own image in these fifty-six different posts, they all seem to serve as calls to action, often referencing the photo as part of the call. It is here that we can begin to see how the specific affordances of 4chan's platform help shape the rhetorical currency of these bookish practices. In other words: the platform helps determine why and how these digital instantiations of physical books matter.

Unlike other social media platforms, 4chan is designed for the rapid production of new content. The ephemeral nature of threads and posts is a deliberate feature. When a new comment is added to a thread, it gets bumped to the top of the entire board. To prevent any thread from staying at the top too long, each board has a "bump limit." Once a thread reaches its maximum of three hundred comments or five hundred images—specific to /pol/—it is removed from the site, effectively vanishing into obscurity. This encourages users to post comments, ensuring that these threads remain visible on /pol/, where they are more likely to be read by the 4chan audience. Notably, promoting image posts over text takes advantage of the differing bump limits. Because threads disappear quickly, repeated postings of images or similar content do not stand out as they might on other platforms. This

mechanism ensures that White nationalist content is consistently recycled in spaces like /pol/.

The frequent reposting of images across different contexts also highlights the generic character of White nationalist rhetoric. Here, “generic” carries a dual meaning. In one sense, it refers to a distinct genre of bookish shelf thread posts, which foreground physical books as both object and discourse. At the same time, these posts also cultivate a generic ethos—one that is not tied to an individual but rather emerges through repeated, recognizable forms of engagement. Posting “personal” images of one’s collection in bookish shelf threads allows users to participate in these rhetorical spaces without requiring explicit ideological expression. What is more, for at least some in the 4chan /pol/ community, photos of a user’s “personal” collection lend credibility that might otherwise be hard to come by. As one /pol/ commenter noted in a thread about “red-pilled literature”:

always look at peoples personal collections, largely ignore assembled reading lists of stock photos. . . . of course, check out the lists they provide, but always compare them to anons actual libraries. . . . if anons are spending money on literature and actually promoting them, theres a high chance they are worth a read. (Anonymous 2021)

The fact that a poster may be merely posting an image copied from another post (which itself may have copied the image) is irrelevant. “Bookish” shelf posts provide a way to participate in ideological space through an alternate currency—one that does not necessarily require fluency in complex ideological discourse.

Put another way, these practices amplify (and are amplified by) forms of analytical austerity that infuse White nationalism. For example, Kieran Aarons points to David Lane’s “Fourteen Words,” the de facto White nationalist motto, as an example of such analytical austerity. Today, the mere appearance of “14”—whether as a tattoo, username, or hastily written graffito—signals the presence of White nationalism, though the bare fact of “14” itself lacks explicit ideological content. Even Lane’s “Fourteen Words” statement—“We must secure the existence of our people and a future for White children”—is a relatively empty signifier. Nevertheless, Aarons argues, the phrase conveys a world of communication whose “ideal context of interpretation is not theoretical but passionate and pragmatic” (2023, 273). In a sense, it does not matter that “securing the existence” does not point to articulable specifics insofar as its purpose does not hinge on exposition. As a doctrine, it “does not want to be understood; its purpose is to be answered in practice” (272). Rather, the “Fourteen Words” aims to intensify and amplify White nationalist affinities at an affective level. Consequently, while someone who scrawls “14” on a bathroom stall may not know Lane’s phrase, they are likely to understand its affective resonance. Though they may not know the text, they know its rhetorical currency.

We see something similar happening in the acts of bookish postings above. Sharing a picture of one’s “personal” bookshelf filled with White nationalist literature is meant

to be understood on an affective level rather than an analytical one. The true ownership of the bookshelf is irrelevant, just as it does not matter whether one has read the books. Even if someone has never read past the first page of *Siege*, for example, their “*Siege* selfie” resonates. It is here that we see how such generic rhetorical acts facilitate engagement by opening up channels of communication that operate through resonance. As these photos prompt others to comment, share, and contribute, far-right spaces like 4chan’s /pol/ board amplify White nationalist affinities through the generic affordances of bookishness.

Unpacking Muh Library

A different *generic* currency shows up in another dimension of bookish White nationalism: the bookshelf tour video. In contrast to the anonymity of 4chan’s shelf threads, bookshelf tour videos are overwhelmingly driven by the personal. Far-right bookshelf tour videos thus look exactly as you might imagine: handheld cameras panning over stacks of books, moving from shelf to shelf, showing off White nationalist and neo-Nazi literature collections. Oddly enough, however, it is the other contents on these shelves—books about gardening, chemistry textbooks, Garfield comic books, sci-fi novels—that can tell us the most about what is happening here.

For example, in a fourteen-minute Bitchute video titled “Racist Library,” the videographer begins with an opening shot of a RAHOWA flag hanging on the wall (Aryan 2020).¹¹ He then pans to a line of toys, including a plushy version of the Death Star from *Star Wars* and several action figures. From there, the video zooms onto titles of books lining a shelf, beginning with a closeup of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. As the video progresses, we see texts that any self-proclaimed racist might own: Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, numerous books by Ben Klassen, collections of Hitler’s speeches, and so on. Yet, the camera then moves to shelves containing a mashup of books on esoteric philosophy and occult magic, textbooks on informal logic, and books on Illuminati conspiracy theories. A stack of books by Nietzsche appears alongside a T. S. Elliot poetry collection. Books by Julius Evola are sandwiched between RV repair manuals. Throughout the video, we see the most virulently antisemitic texts sitting next to mundane books that might be found on anyone’s shelf. Whatever else might be said about this particular “racist library,” it is certainly not lacking eclecticism.

We see something similar from Cultured Thug, a White nationalist with a well-known online presence. Cultured Thug has produced several lengthy bookshelf tour videos, most running over an hour. In one such video, a classical music soundtrack plays in the background as Cultured Thug zooms in to the top shelf of a bookcase. “We’ll start in the Jewish question section, obviously,” he begins. He slowly pans across dozens of antisemitic texts, stopping to pull out books to show the camera (2019).

11 In White nationalist circles, RAHOWA is an acronym for “Racial Holy War.”

After an exhaustive look at the “Jewish question” shelves, he then moves seamlessly to a bookshelf that could perhaps be found in any average home library. He points out works by H. L. Mencken and Mark Twain, a book about the benefits of breathing through your nose, and a biography of Mike Tyson, along with many other unremarkable titles (figure 6). With equal seamlessness, the camera then cuts to a book propped up on a wooden holder. “This is my pride and joy. The first American print edition of *Mein Kampf*,” he says while showing off the dusty cover. He flips carefully through the pages and emphatically repeats, “*First American print edition.*” On a dime, the camera pans back to more bookshelves lined both with obscure neo-Nazi texts and the kinds of literary classics found almost anywhere.



Figure 6. Images from Cultured Thug’s bookshelf tour video.

At first, I surprised by how these videos pivoted between White nationalist texts and “ordinary” books. As I watched more bookshelf tours, however, I found that this kind of pivot was common to such videos on far-right platforms. A thirty-minute bookshelf tour by The Youthful Curmudgeon, another White nationalist figure, is nearly identical to Cultured Thug’s video. In the opening narration, the author gives details about the antisemitic texts lining his shelves, stopping to note texts that are unique or rare. Showing off an annotated version of *You Gentiles* by Maurice Samuel, he explains, “I don’t have the real version. I can’t find it anywhere. I have it downloaded on PDF, but this is the only version I could find” (Youthful Curmudgeon 2019). The video continues in this vein, with The Youthful Curmudgeon occasionally telling stories about how he acquired certain books. However, much like Cultured Thug’s video, The Youthful Curmudgeon hops between neo-Nazi texts and books that are worlds away from fascist ideologies, including Calvin and Hobbes anthologies, several books by Michael Pollan, and *The Green Witch: Your Complete Guide to the Natural Magic of Herbs, Flowers, Essential Oils, and More* (figure 7).

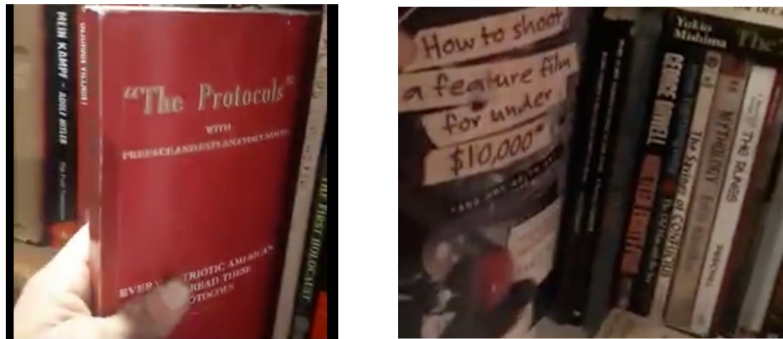


Figure 7. Two stills from The Youthful Curmudgeon’s bookshelf tour: *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* and *How to Shoot a Feature Film for Under \$10,000*.

As I watched these videos, I was reminded of Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library” (his own version of a bookshelf tour), where he ruminates on the assorted books that make up his collection. They are just individual books, differently acquired and without particular relations between them. Even so, Benjamin reflects, this motley assortment of books is a *library*. More specifically, it is *his* library, though it may not appear this way to anyone else. His library is a sense of something existing as a totality, coming into existence through familiar habituation: “For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order?” (1968, 59). Through a kind of habituation, order is evoked. The sense of something existing as a totality resonates in a space of disorder. Benjamin’s brief essay kept coming to mind as I tried to make sense of what is happening in these videos. As I watched them unpack their libraries, I got the sense of something being evoked—a totality that transcends individual books within the whole. A habituated sense of order.

I especially found myself reflecting on this evocative order when speaking with Michael, a popular far-right streamer whose channel, “Muh Fashy Bookshelf,” features lengthy bookshelf tours. In typical episodes, Michael shows off a physical book and describes how he acquired it, as well as comments about the book’s value. His extensive library includes almost every neo-Nazi, fascist, and White nationalist text imaginable. During our conversation, when I asked if he calls himself a White nationalist, Michael forcefully rejected the suggestion. “I’m proud to be a fascist,” he explained, and a believer in White European superiority. But, he continued, White nationalists are hot-headed, uneducated, immature, and focused on the wrong issues: “Those people are either LARPer, grifters, or they’re hyper-focused on Jews.”¹² This last comment shocked me, since one of the first questions he asked

¹² LARP is a mainstream acronym for “live-action role-playing,” though derogatory references to “LARPer” in far-right discourse are meant to criticize individuals who are seen as not fully invested in White nationalist ideology.

me was whether I was “of European descent.” When I pointed out that his expansive library prominently features White nationalist texts (something he proudly shares in his videos), he brushed away this detail. “I have all kinds of books,” he replied, “including books by Jews. I even have books by Blacks.”¹³

Michael’s comment immediately brought me back to Benjamin’s *habituated sense of order*. White nationalist texts placed alongside “all kinds of books” evoke a totality. *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion* is part of the same totality that also includes RV manuals and informal logic textbooks. The same totality contains neo-Nazi manifestos and “even books by Jews.” In short, these videos are fostering a kind of performative parallelism, rendering fascist and antisemitic texts equivalent to mainstream biographies of famous athletes or books on essential oils. Geoff Boucher and Helen Young note something quite similar in their analysis of the Colchester Collection, an online library that prominently features White nationalist texts alongside subjects like “Arts and Entertainment,” “Philosophy,” and “Fiction.” Boucher and Young argue that the Colchester Collection seeks to legitimate far-right texts through their strategic proximity to mainstream literature (2023, 144). Much like the bookshelf tour videos, therefore, the Colchester Collection unfolds through a performative parallelism, one that creates a rhetorical adjacency to White nationalism. It is the physical embodiment of *just asking questions*: advocating a position through a rhetoric of coexistence. White nationalism is only one idea among others, just as a White nationalist book is only one part of the library’s totality.

Post-Print Inconclusions

What I have described above are just two small examples of the ideological genericism enabled by post-print rhetorics on the far right. There are, of course, plenty of other instances that also call for critical inquiry. For example, we can find a familiar kind of performative parallelism at work in recent far-right social media discourse around “Little Free Libraries,” small book-sharing boxes (usually located in neighborhoods) where people can take or leave books for free. In 2023, the extremist website Counter-Currents, run by self-professed White nationalist Greg Johnson, announced a “grant” providing individuals with five free Counter-Currents books to place in local Little Free Libraries, promoting this as “a great way to share new ideas in your neighborhood—including white identity politics” (Quinn 2023). Participants were encouraged to “send us pictures to share on social media!” Johnson’s initiative likely drew inspiration from the neo-Nazi website The Daily Stormer, which previously prompted readers to place copies of Benjamin Garland’s antisemitic book *Merchants of Sin* in Little Free Libraries nationwide. Beyond these two PR stunts, many individuals have shared photos of

13 Communication with the author, January 21, 2024, and January 30, 2024.

their contributions to these libraries, showcasing their red-pilled and pro-White selections (figure 8).

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Figure 8. Picture of Johnson’s *The White Nationalist Manifesto* added to a Little Free Library.¹⁴

Sneaking literature into libraries is not a new tactic for White nationalists, yet because physical books have taken on different kinds of value in a post-print era, Little Free Libraries also enable new rhetorical possibilities. Little Free Libraries contain a mishmash of genres and subjects, making nothing seem “out of place.” Consequently, nothing is ever “out of place” in the Little Free Library; it is always a ready example of a collective disorder. The fact that these far-right books are placed among a motley assortment of “ordinary” books is, for this very reason, more rhetorically effective than if *every* book was an extremist, antisemitic, far-right text. By placing White nationalist literature alongside mainstream

14 Counter-Currents (@countercurrents), Telegram, November 30, 2023, <https://t.me/countercurrents/5803>.

books, it becomes another alternative, equivalent to the paperback mysteries, textbooks, books about gardening, presidential biographies, and the like.

In short, perhaps one of the only things we might agree with Johnson about is the fact that, as Filipe Carreira da Silva writes, “books have agency . . . because they are first and foremost social objects” (2016, 6). Insofar as post-print books are different kinds of social objects, however, it is important to trace their specific impacts and effects in the realm of White nationalism. By understanding the rhetorical power of such tactics—asking what they make possible in White nationalist spaces and, consequently, in the broader sphere of public life—we can better advocate for a critical engagement with literature and a more informed public discourse.

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Ausländerfrei!*The Hoyerswerda Pogrom, 1991*

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The main force driving German politics today is immigration and the resulting large foreign-born and native-born population of immigrant origin. With the flourishing of the nativist-populist *Alternativ für Deutschland* (Alternative for Germany, AfD), the groveling to it, last year, of the venerable *Christlich Demokratische Union* (Christian Democratic Union, CDU) and the shambolic, bumbling start to Friedrich Merz's CDU chancellorship, Germany has entered into a new political era—one in which extreme right-wing views become normal, at least so far as immigration is concerned. At this writing, the German government is considering banning the AfD, but this step is debatable from the standpoint of democratic governance and might even make the problem of foreigner hatred worse.

With this in mind, it is an opportune time to revisit what the French call the *banalisation* of anti-foreigner sentiment. This commentary describes the event that brought Germany's inchoate *völkisch* rage, more than a taste of which the United States is now experiencing, out of the shadows and into the daylight—the Hoyerswerda pogrom of September 17–23, 1991.¹

The Hoyerswerda episode remains little known, displaced in collective memory by the August 1992 event that sent German extreme right-wing violence up the international pop charts: the anti-asylum seeker riot in Rostock, a city in the state of Mecklenburg-Pomerania, which involved several hundred hardcore perpetrators, with perhaps three thousand townspeople abetting. And by the steady dribble of more individualized and narrowly targeted, but deadlier, events. In November 1992 in Mölln, Schleswig-Holstein, three Turks were killed and nine injured when their houses were firebombed. In May 1993

1 For the sources on which my account is based, see the appendix. It is debatable whether the Hoyerswerda episode was a *pogrom*—a term commonly used to describe the massacre of Jews—or a mere riot. My view is that the violent expulsion, by a majority mob, of a national, religious, ethnic, or sexual minority qualifies as a pogrom. The Russian etymology of the term (meaning to “destroy by violence”) also supports this expansive view. Perhaps settling the matter, the event was interchangeably called a riot and a pogrom in the German press.

in Solingen, North Rhine-Westphalia, five Turks were killed and fourteen injured. In recent memory, there is the October 2019 synagogue shooting in Halle, Saxony-Anhalt, which resulted in two dead and several injured, and the murder, a few months earlier in June 2019, of Angela Merkel's *Willkommen* asylum policy defender, the CDU politician Walter Lübke, outside his home near Kassel, in Hesse. The latest (2023) annual report of the Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz (Office for Protection of the Constitution) estimates 1,148 criminal offences committed in that year by right-wing extremists, including four attempted murders and 1,016 instances of bodily harm.² This is to miss the scores of assaults, even beatings, that do not make it into the official statistics. For them, you would have to scour the local press and Antifa websites. Above all, the Hoyerswerda pogrom has been displaced in German memory by the Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund (NSU) fiasco, in which a trio of just-better-than-stoners barely out of their teens set out on a murderous rampage designed to bring down the German state and gave that state a good run for its money.³

* * *

Hoyerswerda (“HoyWoy” to the locals) lies in German coal country—the Black Triangle, an environmental disaster zone cutting through East Saxony, Poland, and what we on the winning side of the Cold War game used to affectionately call Czecho. In 1955, ground was broken at Hoyerswerda for the largest industrial project destined ever to be constructed in the communist German Democratic Republic (Deutsche Demokratische Republik, DDR), the Schwarze Pumpe coal gasification plant, plus a briquette manufactory, both fed by the neighboring open-pit lignite mine. Advertisements were posted throughout the DDR to attract migrants to the new workers’ paradise. A town was built from scratch

2 See the *Verfassungsschutzbericht 2023* (Berlin: Bundesministerium des Innern und für Heimat, 2024), https://www.verfassungsschutz.de/SharedDocs/publikationen/DE/verfassungsschutzberichte/2024-06-18-verfassungsschutzbericht-2023-startseitenmodul.pdf?__blob=publicationFile&cv=11.

3 Between January 1998, when they went underground after being tipped off about a botched police raid, and November 2011, when two members committed suicide after a failed bank robbery and the third surrendered to the police, the NSU murdered ten persons of immigrant background and one German policewoman, gravely wounded a German policeman with a bullet to the head, carried out a nail-bomb attack that maimed dozens on a Turkish shopping street in Cologne, as well as one in a Nuremberg café that shredded a young Turkish woman’s face, and committed fifteen daylight robberies—reckoned to amount to some EUR 615,000—to cover the rent, groceries, beer, and summer holidays on the North Sea. The incompetence of the federal and state-level security forces, both cops and spooks, has become legendary. Rumors of complicity abound, and the chummy relationship between intelligence services, their protected informers, and the NSU terrorists was so tangled that no investigative, let alone prosecutorial, mind will ever sort it out. As one pithy saying has it, “The German state fought the Rote Armee Fraktion [Red Army Faction, popularly known as the Baader-Meinhof Gang]. It financed the NSU.” Racism played a role, as well, with the police long blaming the murders on internecine Turkish gang wars. Following a five-year trial of the survivor and a few hangers-on that satisfied no one, multiple parliamentary inquiries, and an official apology to the German nation by Chancellor Angela Merkel, the NSU scandal poisons German politics to this day.

across the river from the existing old one, eventually housing some 60,000 inhabitants and dwarfing the original settlement of 7,000 or so. Row on row of *Plattenbau*—the cheap, bolted-together prefab concrete-block rectangular buildings inspired by Le Corbusier that were to DDR housing what the Trabant was to family transport—sprang up to house the miners and plant workers and their families. The new neighborhoods were named—here is DDR imagination for you—Housing Complex I through Housing Complex X.

DDR imagination was to architectural charm as the DDR workforce to labor productivity. And not only had many young men perished in the war, but the East hemorrhaged youth to the West throughout the 1950s until the Berlin exit loophole was closed by the Wall in 1961. One response to the labor shortage was the institution of bilateral worker visa programs with comradely states. It started with siblings Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary, and Romania, but when the supply of European kinfolk dwindled, treaties were negotiated farther afield, with more exotic and darker-complected relatives, such as communist cousins Cuba, Algeria, Vietnam, and Mozambique. This was to be mutually beneficial circular migration, nothing like the capitalist exploitation of Turkish and Italian guest workers in the liberal-democratic Federal Republic of Germany (Bundesrepublik Deutschland, BRD). Imported workers were to receive training in valuable skills, which they could take back to their homes along with the socialist consciousness they had absorbed, imparting both to their benighted countrymen. All for the betterment of the grateful visitors and the elevation of their homelands.

In fact, the policy goal was to use up the contract workers and throw them out before they could become established or, God forbid, seduce local women and start breeding like the American soldiers stationed in the BRD. Extensions to the basic five-year contract were rarely granted and workers were subject to immediate dismissal and expulsion for failure to observe socialist work standards (“Fight American imperialism! Show up for work on time!” urged one poster). There was no training in valuable skills. Lacking in German and with rudimentary education, the foreign hired help was engaged in menial, repetitive tasks. The most *Lumpen* (literally “ragged,” figuratively “riffraff”) of the *Lumpenproletariat*.

Population has memory, and the loss of young workers due to the war and emigration in the 1950s, together with rock-bottom fertility rates despite generous family and woman-friendly policies, began to pinch hard in the 1980s. The recruitment of foreign contract workers, in the case of Hoyerswerda mostly from Mozambique and Vietnam, accelerated *pari passu* with this demographic decline. They were exclusively male and lived in a *Plattenbau* in Albert-Schweitzer-Strasse. It was a dormitory existence, housed two and four to a room, segregated by race, all goings and comings controlled at the entrance. Bussed to work with the shift bus, bussed back after.

* * *

The DDR collapsed and early chants of *Wir sind das Volk* (We are the people) gave way to *Wir sind ein Volk* (We are one people). Reunification was hastily cobbled together and took official effect on October 3, 1990. Economic and monetary integration had taken place on July 1. In the DDR, expectations of a rise to BRD living standards

ran wild in defiance of the fundamental principle of equilibrium that the bottom does not rise to the top; the two meet somewhere in between. There is neoclassical economics (and classic thermodynamics) for you. Just where in between would be decided by those on top; there is political economy for you. As between the BRD and DDR, it was no contest. Initial euphoria waned as it became clear that Hoyerswerda was broke—out of business. BRD real estate agents descended to snap up prize old-town *Altbau* buildings at bargain-basement rates. There was a wave of Mormon missionaries asking if you had a moment, Jehovah's Witnesses asking if you had read the Bible, Scientologists offering you a free personality test. Environmentalists cried havoc about coal. Management consultants arrived to rationalize the Schwarze Pumpe plant. The gasification complex and the mine were privatized and sold off.

Anti-foreigner feeling rose. We are being laid off; why are we giving jobs to foreigners, some black as the ace of spades, others slant-eyed, who cannot speak a word of comprehensible German? Our rents are going up; do they even pay rent? Ugly rumors had always circulated that, before economic reunification, the contract workers were paid in the precious BRD *Deutschmark*, not the worthless DDR *Ostmark* like everyone else.

The jig was up for the foreigners. The contracts of the Mozambicans were due to expire at the end of September 1991, those of most of the Vietnamese in December. All were on reduced hours. The Mozambicans passed their leisure in the summer of 1991 lounging around the public space in front of the Albert-Schweitzer-Strasse dormitory wearing outfits and listening to music whose loudness offended the neighbors in equal degree. The Vietnamese, a mercantile people, and one that had never been as despised as the Africans, were more proactive: they cornered the illegal trade in cigarettes, mostly smuggled from Czecho, in the weekly new-town market at Lausitzer Platz.

* * *

As a teenager in the late DDR or just after, to be a conformist like your parents was to be a *Schleimer*, a toady. If you had any get-up-and-go, you hung with either the punk or the skinhead scene, and which one did not matter so much as the gesture of contempt for the System. Sometimes the two even hung amicably together, distinguishable only by their hairdos and the shoelaces on their boots—white for the skins, red for the punks. The punks listened to The Clash and AC/DC. The skinheads listened to Skrewdriver and Neue Werte.

“Neo-Nazi” is a term of disputable legal, political, and sociological meaning; but it will do until a better one shows up. If you wanted to act out and cause a teenaged commotion in those heady times, then celebrating the Third Reich, flinging Nazi salutes, and so on was a good place to start. And if you were one of that sliver of humanity that enjoys inflicting violence on others at close quarters, hand to hand, even at risk of being injured yourself, then better a skin than a punk. Not to forget: there were no neo-Nazis in the DDR. Party line. Fascism was the outgrowth of capitalism and, in the BRD, it was practically bourgeois, as exemplified by leading

lights of the far-right and neo-Nazi scenes like Michael Kühnen (a former German Air Force officer), Jürgen Rieger (attorney), Gerhardt Frey (real estate tycoon), and Christian Worch (notary's assistant). In the DDR, fascism had been eliminated root and branch; there were only anti-social hooligans and "rowdies." Nothing political about it.

There is, in Germany, a wide margin of appreciation for public drunkenness. The open consumption of beer is, unless you are staggering, vomiting, or near comatose, a sacred right, and the legal age is sixteen. Late in the afternoon of Tuesday, September 17, 1991, a group of skins was hanging out at the Lausitzer Platz market making a civic nuisance of themselves—swilling beer with the odd shot of vodka, bellowing snatches of songs by favorite banned neo-Nazi bands, overturning parked bicycles, mocking the good citizens out for their shopping, and assaulting, with perhaps some mild battery thrown in, the odd punk passerby who came within their orbit. Just lads being lads after a few too many. When the ciggies ran out, they mobbed one of the Vietnamese trading tables and helped themselves.

In the retail cigarette black market, margin is thin. Smuggled inventory, always at risk of being confiscated by the police, is financed at loan-shark rates and precious as a consequence. So, it is not surprising that a scuffle ensued. At 17:20, two police wagons arrived, and amid much shoving and abuse, the police detained seven persons. But more skins had shown up, and the rumor spread that a Vietnamese had stabbed one of their friends' dogs. That was *casus belli* for the skins.

* * *

Discretion is the better part of valor, Falstaff observed in *Henry IV*, part 1. Respecting that principle, the Vietnamese withdrew to shelter in their Albert-Schweitzer-Strasse dormitory. The skinheads followed, picking up camp followers along the way. The crowd shouting threats and racist slogans in front of the *Plattenbau* grew to about forty and started to throw bottles at the windows, behind which the residents cowered. The police showed up at 18:15 and were met with a torrent of abuse. Neighbors gathered to cheer the rioters on. Police from surrounding towns were called at 19:00, and by about 21:00 the sun had fallen, the scene had been controlled, and the crowd disbursed.

But the news had spread, and to judge from what ensued, this was the best after-work and after-school entertainment in Hoyerswerda for months. By 17:00 on Wednesday, September 18, there was a mob of four or five dozen skins and diverse other malcontents in front of the building, and the number of upstanding neighbors gathered in support exceeded one hundred. Stones were thrown and the crowd cheered every time a window was broken, roaring that universal cry of triumph—*Gooo . . . al!* Beleaguered dormitory residents sallied to defend the building, and the seventy police now on the scene, reinforced by a special commando unit from Dresden, struggled to separate the two sides. By 19:30, the crowd outside the building was estimated to be 200 to 250 persons. The usual wet blankets—a

bureaucrat from the local office of the state government (*Landesamt*) of Saxony, another from the office representing foreign workers, and various persons of the cloth representing Christian values—showed up to preach tolerance. But, whereas their message was a cloying mix of the didactic, the chiding, and the cajoling, the message of the mob was straight, no chaser: If you do not get these people out of here, we will do it ourselves.

In public communicative space, it does not get simpler than that. Thus did the theft of a few packs of cigarettes become a pogrom.

* * *

On Thursday the nineteenth, sympathizers arrived on trains and buses from across the region for this impromptu neo-Nazi Woodstock. The crowd of supportive locals had grown further; by 19:45, it was estimated at over five hundred. The first Molotov cocktails were thrown, none penetrating the building but exploding on the terrace in front to loud huzzahs. Petrol was siphoned from parked automobiles and poured into empty beer bottles to make more Mollies. The police tried to contain the access to the scene with roadblocks, but that did not alleviate the situation within the perimeter, where the security forces were now massed shoulder to shoulder with helmets and neck-to-knee riot shields to defend the building. Besieged residents threw missiles—bottles, glasses, chairs, and the like—from the roof. It was midnight before the situation was finally brought under control.

The mighty German state swung into action on Friday the twentieth with the arrival on the scene of a senior official from *Landesamt* Saxony. The police presence had now grown to three hundred. At a lunchtime meeting, crisis management's thinking crystallized around three conclusions: 1) the weekend was coming and, leisure being what leisure is, this was going to get worse before it got better; 2) the citizens were against, not with, the forces of order; so 3) the mob was going to grow bored with attacking the foreigners and turn their attention increasingly to the police.

Conclusion: the *Ausländer* (foreigners) had to go. As a goodwill gesture to the mob, that afternoon the police freed from custody all rioters who had been detained. Buses were brought to Albert-Schweitzer-Strasse and all but about seventy residents whose contracts were still valid for another month were evacuated. The crowd jeered and applauded as they were bused away to Frankfurt or Berlin, where they were clapped on the back, given an "attaboy," and put on the plane back home.

* * *

The German state had surrendered to the mob, a message that was to reverberate across Germany in coming months. But if the authorities thought they had ended the party by removing the punch bowl, they were naive—things were just getting lively. For months, a source of discontent even greater than the foreign contract workers was the novel post-reunification presence in Hoyerswerda of about a thousand asylum seekers from

across the world. Then, as now, Germany was a magnet for the international asylum system's refugees—a country where you were decently housed and provided with a basic stipend while your claim was considered. A few side hustles—odd jobs, petty theft and extortion, loose joints—would generate supernumerary resources to round out the ends of the month. Your case was adjudicated at a measured pace, with plenty of room for judicial review and going to ground if it was rejected (as most were, and are, destined to be). Some 240 asylum seekers were housed on Thomas-Müntzer-Strasse in Housing Complex X.

The next day, the troublemakers from Albert-Schweitzer-Strasse converged on the asylum seekers' dormitory, bringing with them their supporters and attracting a local crowd that grew to an estimated one thousand. This was the Saturday peak that the police had feared. The scene became a family affair: women in housedresses or bathrobes suckled infants; dogs barked and peed at will; men guzzled beer and peed, backs turned, at decent remove. The weather was glorious.

The authorities were, for once, out in front of the mob; they had already decided on Friday that the asylum seekers would have to go the way of the contract workers: "Es besteht einheitliche Auffassung dazu, dass eine endgültige Problemlösung nur durch Ausreise der Ausländer geschaffen werden kann" (The unanimous opinion is that a solution to the problem that will work in the end can only be achieved by the departure of the foreigners). In other words, the only feasible solution was the stupidest one—appeasing the rioters. *Endgültige Problemlösung*, the solution that will work in the end, is a euphemism for the forbidden term *Endlösung* of evil memory: the Nazi "final solution."

However, evacuation raised legal issues because, unlike contract workers, asylum seekers could not, under the foundational non-refoulement principle of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention, to which Germany is a signatory, just be flown back to their homeland. An asylum seeker's claim must be properly assessed, and with the German asylum mill's commitment to grind fair and fine, its wheels turn slowly.

A frantic search was made for available accommodation in towns neighboring Hoyerswerda. Panicked asylum seekers begged to be relocated in the prosperous West, not the penurious East. But the BRD would not let the ex-DDR off the hook: when you joined the club, was its view, you agreed to take the bitter with the sweet. The federal-level allocation system demanded that the new *Länder* (states) must bear their fair share of the burden, and that burden was more several than joint. The problems that started in Saxony ought to stay in Saxony, ran the Berlin view. Even Gerhard Schröder, then minister-president of Lower Saxony and chancellor-to-be, went on the record that any reallocation of the asylum seekers would be a strictly one-off emergency measure.

The residents of the Thomas-Müntzer-Strasse dormitory were not privy to the high-level discussions between Berlin and *Landesamt* Saxony. But they knew which way the wind blew. Even before the peak of the troubles, those who had access to automobiles or public transportation took off on their own, with preference for Berlin or Hanover, where civil society activists and churches awaited them with "there, there" and pats on

the shoulder. The less resourceful boarded, under police guard, a convoy of buses Sunday morning and were removed under a hail of bottles and stones. One missile shattered a bus window, and a young Vietnamese fell back screaming in pain, streaming blood from a sliver of glass in his eye. *Gooo . . . al!* It was hours before a rendezvous with an ambulance could be arranged to take the injured man to hospital for emergency treatment.

In this convoy of the damned, the voyagers passed under highway bridges festooned with anti-foreigner banners, through towns where residents lined the street to heckle them—they were dumped at abandoned railway stations or factories, any place with a functioning WC, or were registered at existing asylum-seeker facilities that had no room to accommodate them. Many, in fear, refused to disembark the buses. When an old disused army barracks in a small town was rumored to be used to accommodate some of the displaced foreigners, the locals burned it down. Days passed before the disbursed asylum seekers could be properly disposed of.

Back In HoyWoy, there was jubilation. Its people, who apart from some footballers had never really amounted to much, had coined the German *Unwort* (a detestable word, literally an “un-word”) of the year: *Ausländerfrei!*

Appendix: A Selection of Sources

To understand extreme right-wing violence in Germany, the best place to start is with the NSU. The NSU literature does not treat the Hoyerswerda pogrom itself but depicts the social and institutional context in which right-wing extremism has flourished. Its corpus is vast, consisting of books, newspaper and magazine articles, television interviews and documentaries, advocacy and nongovernmental organization (NGO) reports and websites, and federal and state parliamentary inquiries running to thousands of pages. This is not to mention theater pieces, art exhibitions and installations, and so on.

A number of sources deserve note, but hovering above all of these is the four-volume set *Der NSU-Prozess: Das Protokoll* (The NSU trial: The record), published in 2018 by Verlag Antje Kunstmann with the support of the Stiftung Rudolf Augstein. It is a peculiarity of German law, at least from the Anglo-Saxon point of view, that trial transcripts and recordings are not allowed. A team of four, led (to judge by priority in the authors' list) by *Süddeutsche Zeitung* journalist Annette Ramelsberger, followed the case daily throughout its progression over five years, casting their notes into text. The research apparatus is not so much an apparatus in the traditional sense of an index and list of references as it is a multidimensional concordance of biblical proportions. An appendix of legal terms is particularly useful to the non-German lawyer.

An extensive synopsis of the five-year trial, with critical apparatus, has been published by NSU Watch, a left-leaning advocacy and watchdog NGO (<https://www.nsu-watch.info>).

Heimat Schutz (Homeland protection) by Stefan Aust and Dirk Laabs, published in 2014 by Pantheon, is a nine-hundred-plus-page account that can also be considered authoritative. Aust is a former editor of *Der Spiegel* and *Die Welt*; Laabs

is a well-known investigative reporter. The research apparatus is excellent. There is, as well, a gazetteer of the complicated legal and law enforcement landscape of the case. A weakness of the volume is that, not content with telling a story, the authors are on a mission to prove beyond doubt that the NSU was supported, à la Red Army Faction, by a vast web of sympathizers who have never been brought to justice (plausible), and that the German security and intelligence forces were not only incompetent (indubitable) but deliberately botched the investigation (plausible, but speculative). The authors also produced a television documentary, *Der NSU Komplex* (The NSU complex), based on their research (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3miMf0X_0b4&t=762s).

More digestible, but less authoritative, is Tanjev Schultz's *NSU: Der Terror von rechts und das Versagen des Staates* (NSU: Terror from the right and the failure of the state), published in 2018 by Droemer. Schultz, like Aust and Laab, is a journalist (a former editor at *Süddeutsche Zeitung*).

On the academic side, Matthias Quent's *Rassismus, Radikalisierung, Rechtsterrorismus: Wie der NSU entstand und was er über die Gesellschaft verrät* (Racism, radicalization, right-wing terrorism: How the NSU arose and what it reveals about society), published in 2016 by Beltz Juventa, is an analysis of the development of the NSU from the perspective of political sociology, with an emphasis on the internal dynamics of the right-wing scene and of the NSU itself.

What was it like to be young and setting out in life when the Wall came down? Journalist Sabine Rennenfanz's *Eisenkinder: Die stille Wut der Wendegeneration* (Children of iron: The silent anger of the reunification generation), published in 2013 by Luchterhand, is good on this. She describes the desperate need for something to believe, which, for her, led to brief attachment to an extreme Christian sect. Quent is also good on this search for meaning, if more pedantic and consequently less readable.

Best on the mood of the time, though, is Sven (Rossi) Rossman, a hardened skinhead responsible for multiple acts of violence, for which he served long prison terms. Interviewed by Stefan Aust and Dirk Laab for their documentary, he describes how the collapse of the Stasi regime meant total freedom to do anything whatsoever, so long as it destroyed the left and anything that remained of its authority. His descriptions of fights, beatings, demonstrations, and so forth are less descriptions of secular events than they are descriptions of rituals being performed.

* * *

A simple Google Scholar search for "Hoyerswerda" or "Hoyerswerda riots" produces little of academic consequence. Absent fieldwork and interviews, this leaves the author largely at the mercy of journalists, but there are constraints. The archiving of local journalism in Germany—say, the *Hoyerswerdaer Wochenblatt* (Hoyerswerda Weekly)—largely postdates the riots. While antifa newsletters and their counterparts on the right were active at the time, these are strictly ephemera.

What this leaves is a limited supply of reports from the German opinion-leading press and, especially as web archiving developed, the retrospective articles that followed on anniversaries of the events.

A surviving relic from contemporary journalism is Matthias Matussek's feature article "Jagdzeit in Sachsen" (Hunting season in Saxony) from *Der Spiegel*, published on September 29, 1991 (<https://www.spiegel.de/spiegel/print/index-1991-40.html>). Matussek, a highly respected journalist, is (despite *Der Spiegel's* center-left perspective) a recognized Catholic conservative polemicist. The article drips with contempt for the Easterners. As Matussek writes, "In Hoyerswerda hat der häßliche Deutsche sein Coming-out" (In Hoyerswerda, the ugly German has his coming-out [party]).

With that, we are into retrospectives. To mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the riot, *Deutschland Kultur* on September 15, 2016, ran a feature piece by prize-winning journalist Thilo Schmidt entitled "Ausländerjagd im rechtsfreien Raum" (Foreigner hunt in a lawless zone) (<https://www.deutschlandfunkkultur.de/rassistische-ausschreitungen-in-hoyerswerda-100.html>). Schmidt is good on quoting eyewitness memories of the event. An example:

Ich hab damals ne Siebener-Regel aufgestellt. 70 haben am Anfang randaliert. Sieben haben sich dagegen gestellt. Mehr nicht. Und jetzt kommt eigentlich das Schlimme: 700—junge Familien mit Kindern—die haben Beifall geklatscht—jetzt schmeißen sie endlich die Nigger raus. Und 70.000—die haben geschwiegen. (I invented the rule of seven back then. There were 70 rioters at the beginning. Seven people stood up to them. No more. And now comes the worst: 700—young families with children—applauded— they're finally throwing the niggers out. And 70,000—they didn't say a thing.)

Another interviewee spoke to a number of the rioters and reported their surprise that, far from trying to get them to stop, the bystanders encouraged them to keep it up.

Also in 2016, on September 21, there appeared in *Die Zeit* the Tilman Steffen piece "Angst als Antreib" (Fear as a driver) (<https://www.zeit.de/gesellschaft/2016-09/hoyerswerda-neonazis-fluechtlingsunterkunft-vertragsarbeiter-polizei-afd>). A short feature piece, its most interesting point is describing the recollection of a young policeman present at the scene—appalled at what he witnessed yet, at the time of writing, ironically a local AfD official.

Another 2016 retrospective is David Krenz's September 20 piece "Die Tage der Schande" (Days of shame) in *Der Spiegel* (<https://www.spiegel.de/geschichte/hoyerswerda-1991-rassistische-uebergrieffe-in-sachsen-a-1112887.html>). The author was then a photographer, later editor in chief, of the *Hoyerswerdaer Wochenblatt*. He reported on the occasion of a fifteenth anniversary event at the local office of Die Linke, the reconstructed DDR communist party.

Thirtieth-anniversary retrospectives were muted and fewer in number. On September 15, 2021, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published “Wenn die Brühe Hochkommt” (When the broth boils over) (<https://www.sueddeutsche.de/projekte/artikel/politik/hoyerswerda-wie-1991-auslaender-gejagt-wurden-e985000/>) by Ulrike Nimz, a journalist with long experience in the East. The piece focuses on two men, one a pastor who was subsequently involved in supporting the immigrant community, the other a pensioned senior police official tasked with containing the riot. On handling the rioters: “Wir waren schlecht ausgerüstet, unorganisiert. Es gab keine Hierarchie in der Befehlsgewalt. . . . [W]ir waren nicht Herr der Lage, Wir waren Zuschauer” (We were badly equipped, unorganized, with no clear chain of command. . . . We were not masters of the scene. We were spectators.) On evacuating foreigners from the city: “Es war für ihren Schutz vielleicht richtig, aber für Fremdenfeinde war es das Signal: Mit Gewalt könnt ihr die Leute vertreiben” (It may have been right for their protection, but for foreigner haters it was a signal: you can drive people away with violence).

The Sächsische Landeszentrale für politische Bildung (Saxony State Center for Political Training, under the State Ministry for Culture) published, in 2021, “Hoyerswerda 1991 im Kontext: Eine kurze historische Einordnung” (Hoyerswerda 1991 in context: A short historical analysis) (<https://www.slpb.de/blog/hoyerswerda-1991-im-kontext-eine-kurze-historische-einordnung>). The piece delivers a glance into the late 1980s and early 1990s context that gave rise to the Hoyerswerda pogrom. It is, in significant degree, the mea culpa of the government of Saxony for its capitulation to the rioters.

Finally, the Berlin firm Out of Focus Film (<http://www.out-of-focus-film.net>) produced, in 2016–2017, the web documentary *Hoyerswerda 1991*, clips from which may be seen at the film’s interactive website (<https://www.hoyerswerda-1991.de/start.html>). The major contribution of the project is that it is divided into two parts, the first focusing on the events of 1991 and the second on post-1991 Hoyerswerda.

REVIEW

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Talia Lavin, *Wild Faith: How the Christian Right Is Taking Over America*, New York: Legacy Lit of Hachette Book Group, 2024, 304 pp., \$30.00 (hardback), \$15.00 (e-book)

Reviewed by SHEA MINTER (Georgetown University)

In the first two weeks of the second Trump administration, the United States bore witness to a tale of two priests. During the Inaugural Prayer Service at Washington National Cathedral, the Anglican bishop Mariann Budde implored President Trump to “have mercy” on migrants and members of the LGBTQ+ community.¹ She referenced Trump’s stated belief that divine intervention saved him from the assassination attempt in Butler, Pennsylvania, and requested that he show this mercy “in the name of” the same loving God. Trump responded with derision, criticizing the prayer service and the right reverend herself, and demanded an apology.²

A little over a week later, Calvin Robinson—a priest at an Anglican Catholic Church congregation in Grand Rapids, Michigan—held a hand over his heart when addressing attendees at the National Pro-Life Summit, before extending it out from his chest in a straight-armed raised salute. This “gesture” was an apparent reference to Elon Musk’s similar and much-critiqued gesture at an event celebrating Trump’s second inauguration. Both gestures have been called out for what they clearly appear to be—a Nazi salute. Robinson had his license in his church revoked. He took to Facebook to state that he is “not a Nazi,” and he, Musk, and many other mainstream MAGA supporters have pointed to the public discourse that resulted as liberal overreaction.³ On the other hand, members of the far right took

1 Tiffany Stanley, “What to Know about Mariann Budde, the Bishop Who Upset Trump with Her Inaugural Sermon,” *AP News*, January 24, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inaugural-prayer-service-episcopal-bishop-mariann-budde-60d409d1ba9b69ad1065065b9218c558>.

2 Tiffany Stanley, Darlene Superville, and Gary Fields, “Trump Demands an Apology from Bishop Who Asked Him to ‘Have Mercy’ on LGBTQ+ People and Migrants,” *AP News*, January 21, 2025, <https://apnews.com/article/trump-inaugural-prayer-service-washington-national-cathedral-interfaith-a95b36f962be93c8647cc5144266da11>.

3 Marina Dunbar, “Michigan Priest Defrocked after Making Apparent Nazi Salute at Anti-Abortion Summit,” *Guardian*, January 30, 2025, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2025/jan/30/michigan-priest-salute>.

to podcast appearances and telegram channels to celebrate and praise what they took to be a full Roman salute, or even more explicitly, a Sieg Heil.⁴

These two anecdotes illustrate the timeliness of Talia Lavin's *Wild Faith: How the Christian Right Is Taking Over America*. Both incidents are illustrations of faith interacting with state power, and the response by those in or close to the government clearly shows which was praised and which was condemned. Lavin, the critically acclaimed author of *Culture Warlords*, turns in her second book to the large and diverse Christian right—its agenda, influence, and consequences for US politics. I should note at the top of this review that *Wild Faith* is not an academic text, although it is nonfiction and utilizes primary sources and extensive interviews. As such, many points of critique normally offered in academic reviews are largely moot. Additionally, I want to spend part of this review reflecting on what lessons academics—within the larger realm of right-wing studies, which certainly includes Lavin—can take from book projects such as *Wild Faith*.

Wild Faith is divided into two parts. Part 1 provides a conceptual overview of the Christian right and aspects of its agenda and ideology. Part 2 provides an in-depth look at family politics within the Christian right, particularly the subjugation and abuse of women and children. Chapters address the dispute over school segregation and parental rights in schooling, the homeschool movement, corporal punishment, and doctrinal patriarchy. The structure as a whole is narrative, with explanatory and historical details unfolding throughout the chapters. The concepts build on each other toward Lavin's ultimate goal—understanding the movement with the same seriousness that its adherents do. This is not a book ideal for picking and choosing the subject area most relevant to one's own research and delving into that chapter. I believe it is meant to be read, and is best understood, holistically.

One argument that Lavin tells the reader up front she would like them to come away with is that far-right Christians view themselves as waging “a just and righteous war”—a holy war—and that understanding this conviction is key to understanding the movement (3). She notes in the afterword that it is essential to take their beliefs seriously insofar as they believe what they say. Rather than just professing the high stakes of the movement and its political goals, *Wild Faith* illustrates how eschatology connects to our political environment. She explains the biblical passages—particularly from the book of Revelation—held as truth by the movement, and the doctrinal beliefs that lead to support for politicians viewed as “prophets,” for a full Christian-right economy, and for the ubiquity of right-wing Christianity in legislation and political discourse. Lavin provides examples of the ideology's influence in campaigns regarding gender, healthcare, schooling, and even US foreign policy, including (non)participation in international organizations and treaties.

4 Right Wing Watch (@RightWingWatch), “Hitler-Loving White Nationalist Nick Fuentes on Elon Musk's Salute: ‘That Was a Straight up like ‘Sieg Heil,’ like Loving Hitler Energy,’” X (formerly Twitter), January 21, 2025, <https://t.co/G6ayaFkH1o>; “Musk's Inaugural Roman Salute Sparks Outrage, Far-Right Praise,” Southern Poverty Law Center, January 21, 2025, <https://www.splcenter.org/resources/hate-watch/elon-musks-inaugural-roman-salute-sparks-outrage-far-right-praise/>.

As mentioned, *Wild Faith* is meant for popular consumption. But Lavin does meet high research standards—particularly in part 2, where she reports on an impressive number of ethnographic interviews and examines texts embraced by the Christian right. Lavin draws on a similar approach to Alice Miller’s *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*,⁵ which centered on authoritarian and violent parenting practices in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Germany. Both Lavin and Miller utilize pedagogical texts from the eras they examine, and consider the consequences of teaching, as Lavin quotes one parenting book author, to “extinguish the will of the child utterly” (194). One key theme of Lavin’s book is the violence this population endures, both as children and as wives. Another revealing finding is that this violence is political in its root ideology—families that are obedient to the father are crucial for maintaining social order. A final takeaway from over one hundred interviews with former evangelicals is that this population was “above all . . . grateful that someone was paying attention to them” (201). I believe a significant accomplishment of the book is its thorough treatment of such individual-level family dynamics. At first, moving to the household-level may feel disjointed to the reader, but after hearing multiple first-hand accounts and quotes from movement texts, we see how this small unit of analysis connects to the broader holy war political project.

However, experts on Christian nationalism may find the book too general in its purpose. As a fan of *Culture Warlords*, Lavin’s first book, I found myself wishing there was a greater discussion of how the movement fits into the broader ideology of the far right. She argues that the political influence of the Christian right particularly emerged in response to school desegregation. Yet this treatment came in part 2, and I found myself looking for more analysis on the movement’s ties to and origins in white supremacy.

To say that this is not a text primarily for academics is not to deny its usefulness for those of us locked away in the ivory tower—in fact, quite the opposite. In reading *Wild Faith*, I was struck by three points the field of right-wing studies should take away from the book and consider in future work. The first is to consider further what political science can learn from journalistic and interpretive work on the far right. The rise and ubiquity of the far right in today’s political and media landscapes makes clear that this is a subject with enormous implications. As others have argued, scholars in this field should take journalistic work seriously and consider addressing deficits in mass media with their own public-facing work.⁶ I was struck by the breadth of fields *Wild Faith* invoked—gender studies, communications, international relations, international law, family law, and many more. While I have found the right-wing studies research community very collaborative and boundary-crossing, I think the present moment

5 Alice Miller, *For Your Own Good: Hidden Cruelty in Child-Rearing and the Roots of Violence*, trans. Hildegarde Hannum and Hunter Hannum (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990).

6 A. J. Bauer, “Right-Wing Studies’ Time Has Come,” *Nieman Lab* (blog), accessed January 31, 2025, <https://www.niemanlab.org/2024/12/right-wing-studies-time-has-come/>; A. J. Bauer and Anthony Nadler, “Competing for Cultural Authority: Journalism Studies Must Account for the Right,” *Journalism Studies* 26, no. 5 (2025): 624–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2025.2454344>.

calls for taking narrative and descriptive work—and journalism too—seriously in order to create a broader understanding of the far right, especially within my own field of political science. Political science thrives on “puzzles,” but it is difficult to know what is puzzling about concepts, ideologies, and populations rarely spoken about, or people rarely spoken to.

Second, Lavin shines particularly in part 2 of the book when her analysis turns to the family itself as a small political unit. Particularly in political science—and my own work suffers from this—much of the field focuses on aggregates and higher levels of analysis. Lavin examines the Christian right as a culture and a movement at the level of the family, the individual, and the small group. Attention to granular levels of analysis is useful when considering the far right, particularly in efforts to better understand and analyze the heterogeneities and connections within the broader right-wing ecosystem. For example, chapter 10 notes how popular parenting books in the evangelical community describe children as “tyrants, anarchists, belligerents, and hardened revolutionaries” (203), evoking securitizing language common to nonreligious far-right actors and other strains of conservative ideology. At the same time, here the children are painted as the revolutionaries, whereas the father represents legitimate social order. Among white nationalist terrorists, however, the social order is what is seen as illegitimate and the actors themselves are the revolutionaries. The language is similar, but the fight is different. In one interview, a subject (pseudonymously referred to as “Maria”) describes an attempt to seek community through online Christian homeschooling forums, one of which not only provided socialization but also advice on recommended “discipline” products for sale. Lavin points out in the first section of the book how common grifting and moneymaking strategies are among right-wing influencers, but this anecdote also provides a familiar story of individuals seeking connection online and finding not only community but radicalization.

Lastly, *Wild Faith* made me question my personal definition of far-right ideology, and if it was expansive or inclusive enough. The book begins by discussing Christianity’s hegemony in the history and culture of the United States. Much like Robert Mickey’s work on authoritarian enclaves in the American South questioned the mythology of American democracy,⁷ *Wild Faith* raises questions about the role biblical concepts of authority have played in US politics and law, and how these relate to norms of liberal democracy pertaining to religious liberty. Ours is a time of right-wing resurgence, and right-wing studies as a field would benefit from taking a closer look at our concepts and scrutinizing recent history as well. We may end up with more case studies.

This all points to an expansive to-do list for scholars of the far right, which I believe is a testament to Talia Lavin’s compelling and engaging treatment of the Christian right in *Wild Faith*. It is my hope that scholars will find this book as inspiring as I did, as we all meet the new political era—and age of right-wing studies—we may be entering.

7 Robert Mickey, *Paths out of Dixie: The Democratization of Authoritarian Enclaves in America’s Deep South, 1944–1972* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015).

REVIEW

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Francesca Scrinzi, *The Racialization of Sexism: Men, Women and Gender in the Populist Radical Right*, New York: Routledge, 2024, 214 pp., \$190.00 (hardback), \$54.99 (paperback), \$49.49 (e-book)

Reviewed by PAULA MATTHIES (Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences), VIKTORIA RÖSCH (Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences) and MICHAELA KÖTTIG (Frankfurt University of Applied Sciences)

[T]he goal of biographical research is not only to understand individual cases in the context of individual life histories, but to gain an understanding of societal realities or of the interrelationship between society and life history.

—Gabriele Rosenthal (2004, 62)

This book provides insights into how the populist radical right (PRR) provides its members with a framework for understanding their gendered lives and experiences (7). Going beyond a study of women's and men's mobilization and the members' biographies, it is an analysis of organizations and an in-depth analysis of the relationship between PRR ideologies and gender/sexuality issues, helping us understand the shifts in PRR gender ideology and societal gender relations. The study challenges simplistic views of these parties as uniformly sexist and antifeminist by examining the nuanced ways they mobilize and appeal to members through gender-specific propaganda and ideologies.

To reveal the complex relationships between PRR ideologies, societal gender relations, and socioeconomic developments, Francesca Scrinzi uses an intersectional scope combined with a biographical and ethnographical approach. She focuses on the members' biographies to get an inside view into PRR parties and to understand how mechanisms of mobilization work. Therefore, she also consistently takes national political discourses into account. For this reason, her study is designed as a case comparison between the French party Front National (National Front, renamed Rassemblement National / National Rally in 2018) and the Italian party Lega Nord (Northern League). In this way, it is possible to take into consideration not only different organizations but also the impact of different national gender regimes.

In the first chapter, "Beyond the 'Mothers of the Nation' and the 'Brothers in Arms,'" Scrinzi provides a comprehensive and fruitful review of the research on gender and the PRR since the 1990s. She shows that the research has identified a variety of roles that

women can play beyond the traditional mother figure. At the same time, she outlines how women's rights have been used against immigration in recent years. Sexism, and sexual violence in particular, are externalized onto the Muslim "Other," which she defines as the racialization of sexism. An egalitarian understanding of gender in the Western world is often contrasted with that of Muslims. In this context, the far right positions itself as the supposed guardian of women's rights. She also links changes in gender regimes, neoliberal globalization, and the rise of the far right. The far right fills the void left by the disruptions caused by the demands made on women in the twenty-first century. This includes, for example, the expectation of successfully combining career and family, which often leads to conflicting demands—especially as pop-feminist debates have primarily focused on the career prospects of upper-middle-class women, neglecting issues of class and broader structural inequalities. The phenomenon can be described as "emancipation fatigue" (30). Moreover, Scrinzi outlines the literature on men and the far right. She identifies a gap in the literature: gendered perspectives on right-wing women focus primarily on symbolic and cultural issues, while research on men sees right-wing ideology primarily as a socioeconomic matter. With this book, she aims to fill this gap by integrating these aspects and taking an intersectional view.

As the next component of her analysis, Scrinzi presents the ways in which Lega Nord and Front National have politicized gender issues. In chapter 2, "The Racialization of Sexism," she elaborates on her main argument that sexism is externalized onto the migrant Other. Scrinzi shows how the different political cultures in Italy and France, in particular different relationships between church and state, influence these debates. She also describes the historical shifts in positions on sexuality and gender within both parties. She shows, for example, how the relationship between a traditional PRR gender image and the role of Front National's Marine Le Pen as female leader can be understood as a neoliberal revision of PRR ideologies and the narrative of "free choice" (55). Scrinzi illustrates the interplay between changes in political positions and national discourses, systematically preparing the background for the comparison that follows.

In chapter 3, the focus shifts away from questions of ideology to the different ways in which women and men are mobilized. Scrinzi argues that the PRR is a "gendered social movement" (72) and highlights the importance of emotions in mobilization, which are addressed differently according to gender. She presents quantitative data showing that there is a gender gap in both parties. The gender gap among party members is higher than the gender gap among voters, although the latter has increased. Scrinzi also provides insights into the history and the substantive shifts within the women's organization of Lega Nord, called "Donne Padane." Interestingly, the Front National used to have a group exclusively for women, but it no longer exists. She argues that this is connected to the changes in the Front National's positions on gender issues and the organizational restructuring of the party. Scrinzi illustrates how central the question of

protecting “our women” from the threat of immigrants—the racialization of sexism—is for the parties and their support from women.

In chapter 4, titled “PRR Women Negotiating Gender (In)equality and Feminism,” Scrinzi points out the gendered division of work, roles, and spaces as major mechanisms in marginalizing women in social movements. She finds that PRR women make sense of feminism in different ways depending on generational differences, namely on whether or not they have personally experienced the second-wave feminist movement and its major advancement in women’s rights (117). If they did, they tend to recognize the progress brought by feminism and actually see gender inequalities while still criticizing the movement for having gone too far, whereas younger generations take this progress for granted and do not see gender-specific differences. For the latter, emancipation is seen as an individual choice and responsibility, imposing a neoliberal perspective on gender and inequality (111). Scrinzi concludes this chapter with the insight that women’s negative emotions of fear (concerning economic issues and native cultural identity) are being activated and amplified by how parties frame their messages. Through their engagement in the party, these negative emotions change into positive emotions, which in turn contribute to building internal cohesion and attachments to the party as a “defender of women” and their rights (116).

In chapter 5, Scrinzi discovers the gendered trajectories of PRR women and men. Using their biographies as examples, she shows how biographies grounded in intersecting social inequalities shape political engagement and how activism can have a “socializing effect” (121). Her findings show that professional middle-class women focus on their political career, putting an emphasis on “women’s issues” and emotional work within the party, whereas working-class women perceive their domestic responsibilities and jobs as barriers to political participation. The materialist framing of PRR parties and their emphasis on economic and labor burdens therefore resonate with working-class women’s experience (129). PRR men seem to have different gendered motives for their engagement as well, depending on their generation. Whereas younger men see themselves as breadwinners and heads of the household, older men tend to associate their activism with a fatherly role within the party. Both PRR women and men experience changing patterns of political engagement over the course of their lives, for example triggered by major events such as divorce or the death of a partner. This chapter is summed up by the insight that men’s and women’s different forms of engagement in PRR parties go beyond restoring traditional gender roles (141).

In chapter 6, Scrinzi sums up the findings of her research: women’s and men’s engagement in PRR parties, their motives, and how they (re)produce gendered roles within the parties vary and go beyond the stereotypical notion of the “brothers in arms” and “mothers of the nation.” Men’s and women’s motives for joining and engaging are shaped by life events, class, gender, and religion. Scrinzi even states that PRR activism can bring forms of caring masculinities to the fore (155). These dynamics interact with and change PRR politics. Such politics are affected by structural gendered transformations in society that are informed by a neoliberal project of the self, centered

around self-reliance and personal responsibility. In the context of this transformation, PRR parties have moved away from more traditional family ideology to embrace the neoliberal public gender regime and deploy a new discourse centered on women's freedom (159). This results in construction of a racialized Other that endangers liberal Western society. Finally, Scrinzi calls for seeing PRR activists' trajectories, motives, and practices as inscribed within wider social structures. This means conceiving of PRR activism as an expression of our societies rather than an antiliberal extreme driven by irrationality (163). Referring to the work of Cas Mudde, she calls for perceiving PRR as a "pathological normalcy" of capitalist neoliberal societies (163).

Scrinzi concludes her work with an outlook for further research, for example on new groups such as Fratelli d'Italia, led by Giorgia Meloni (which emphasizes ordinary women as mothers), and Reconquête, led by Éric Zemmour (which emphasizes masculinities and "de-Islamization"). She calls for an approach to gendered counter-extremism that includes gender-aware interventions that challenge stereotypical constructions such as "passive women" and consider the complex roles of women in and outside of the private sphere (178).

Francesca Scrinzi's research provides a comprehensive and at the same time complex insight into men, women, and gender in populist radical right parties, building on a rich empirical base. Her multidimensional approach is convincing. She interweaves questions about political positions and gender ideology with concrete questions about the success of PRR mobilization. A systematic comparison between France and Italy sharpens our view of the phenomenon. The interplay between the political discourses in these countries, shaped by different gender regimes, and the political discussion within the parties is well explained. Her intersectional approach successfully integrates socioeconomic and symbolic issues, illustrating which gender roles operate in which class and age group and what happens in the biographies of individuals who join the party.

Her insight into PRR members' biographies gives a more in-depth understanding of engagement mechanisms. However, her analysis seems to be close to the interviewees' statements. Taking a reconstructive approach into account, it would have been interesting to focus on the level of self-presentation rather than to rely solely on narrated experiences. Biographies exist at the intersection of society and the individual. They can provide information about collective narratives and societal realities (Rosenthal 2004, 62). In a life story we see both, the past's biographical meaning and the meaning of the self-presentation (Rosenthal 2018, 167). The latter is influenced by the present social context of the interviewee. It is here that the narrations of Scrinzi's informants relate to their present engagement in Lega Nord and Front National (now Rassemblement National). Furthermore, the fact that they have been asked to talk about their biography against the background of their engagement in the party influences their narration. They likely present themselves in a particular way, which would be interesting to unravel. To what extent are the narrations shaped by collective party narratives and their ideologies, and how are these narratives being used for (retrospective) meaning making? This analysis

might for instance question Luigi's self-presentation as a fatherly figure in the party and Scrinzi's interpretation of PRR men as expanding gender roles through caring masculinities (140–41). Without getting to the bottom of the self-presentation, one runs a risk of reproducing the interviewees' own arguments.

Nevertheless, Francesca Scrinzi provides us with a fruitful account of the role of women in PRR parties. She also shows how to understand why these parties are becoming more feminine, arguing that PRR parties benefit directly from women's relational and caring skills and their emotional labor (155). She links the changes in PRR parties to a more general societal change. Her analysis thus considers not only the relationship between the state, current political discourse, political positions, gender relations, and individual biographies, but also questions of organizational history. Scrinzi skillfully and insightfully links these different levels in her six chapters. In doing so, the book lays the groundwork for further research, especially comparisons across national contexts.

References

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