

Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Global Wave?

By Vincent A. Auger

Abstract

Violence committed by individuals and groups inspired by far-right ideologies is increasingly seen as a transnational threat. There is an urgent need to better understand why this type of terrorism has become more frequent and how far-right groups operate within and across borders. One promising avenue of analysis is the concept of “waves of terrorism,” pioneered by David C. Rapoport. Rapoport argued that the emergence of distinctive types of terrorist activity in different historical periods could be explained by new underlying political and ideological forces. Rapoport identified four “waves” of terrorist activity since the late 19th century. Does right-wing violence constitute a fifth global wave? This research note evaluates the utility of the “waves of terrorism” argument for understanding right-wing terrorism.

Keywords: right-wing terrorism, white supremacism, waves of terrorism, David C. Rapoport

In March 2019, a gunman in New Zealand livestreamed his attack on two mosques, during which he killed 50 people. The killer was Australian, and his “manifesto” explaining his actions referenced a Norwegian neo-Nazi and European ideologues who fear the extinction of the white race. In August 2019, a man in El Paso, Texas killed 22 people in a Walmart, allegedly to stop a “Hispanic invasion” of the United States. Two months later, an anti-Semite livestreamed his attempt to attack a synagogue in Halle, Germany; failing to gain entrance to the place of worship, he randomly killed two pedestrians. And in February 2020, a right-wing extremist killed nine in a shooting rampage in Hanau, Germany.

These incidents, horrific as they are individually, are part of a broader pattern—a significant growth in far-right terrorism (especially white supremacist/nationalist terror) in recent years, across Europe, North America, Australia and New Zealand. According to an analysis by the Institute for Economics and Peace, there has been a surge in far-right terror incidents since 2010, with a 320% increase between 2014 and 2018.[1]

Jihadist attacks continue to kill more people in Europe, but right-wing extremists in Europe and the U.S. have conducted more attacks and there has been a significant increase in deaths attributed to far-right terror since 2010.[2] An analysis by the group New America shows a sharp increase in far-right terrorism within the United States beginning in 2009–10, with far-right terrorists responsible for more deaths than jihadists since 2008. [3] In early February 2020, FBI Director Christopher Wray testified that “racially/ethnically motivated violent extremists (RMVEs)” are “the top threat we face from domestic violent extremists;” after the Hanau attack, the German justice minister declared that “Far-right terror is the biggest threat to our democracy right now.”[4]

Might this increase in right-wing violence indicate the emergence of a new “wave” of terrorism, as David C. Rapoport defined it almost 20 years ago? Can we use Rapoport’s criteria to evaluate the evolving nature of, and prospects for, far-right terror? This paper will first discuss Rapoport’s theory of waves of terrorism. The paper will then examine whether the recent surge in far-right terrorism fits Rapoport’s concept of a terrorist wave.

Rapoport’s Wave Theory of Terrorism

Rapoport contends that “modern” terrorism began in the late nineteenth century and has distinctive characteristics. He asserts that “time and the changing character of the international political context...gives terrorism a cyclical character.”[5] He termed this a “wave,” defined as

a cycle of activity in a given time period—a cycle characterized by expansion and contraction phases. A crucial feature is its international character; similar activities occur in several countries, driven by a

common predominant energy.[6]

For Rapoport, that “energy” takes the form of an ideology that gains special preeminence, triggered by “unanticipated international political transformations” that expose vulnerabilities in the existing order or that appear to create opportunities for radical change.[7] Rapoport does not argue that every group inspired by this energy pursues the exact same goals; rather, he suggests that “local aims are common in all waves, but the crucial fact is that other states are simultaneously experiencing similar activities.”[8] When that ideology can no longer generate the formation of new organizations, the wave dissipates. Rapoport suggests that waves last “approximately a generation,” about 40 years.[9]

Rapoport identifies four waves of modern terrorism. The “anarchist” wave began in the 1870s, spurred by democratic and egalitarian ideals of the French Revolution, and lasted until the beginning of the First World War. This was followed by an “anti-colonial”/nationalist wave that embraced the post-World War I ideal of national self-determination; according to Rapoport, this wave was dominant from the 1920s through the 1960s. A “leftist” wave, inspired by Marxist-Leninist ideology and reaction against the Vietnam War, lasted from the 1960s until the 1980s. Finally, since 1979, a “religious” wave of terrorism has existed, initiated by several developments in the Muslim world, especially the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

Rapoport argued that this religious wave is merely the latest phase of modern terrorism, and that he expects that a new wave will eventually emerge:

The world of politics always produces large issues to stimulate terrorists who regularly invent new ways to deal with them. What makes the pattern so interesting and frightening is that the issues emerge unexpectedly—or, at least, no one has been able to anticipate their tragic course.[10]

While Rapoport did not speculate about the nature of the next wave of terror, other scholars have offered ideas of what it might look like. D. K. Gupta suggests that if a fifth wave arrives, it “should exhibit a collective consciousness based on ethno-nationalism, religious identity, or economic class. In all probability it would contain elements of all three.”[11] Jeffrey Kaplan suggested that the fifth wave would be composed of ethnic utopians trying to remake their societies, following the example of Cambodia’s Khmer Rouge.[12] Jeffrey Simon asserts that no single ideology will dominate a fifth wave, but instead a “Technological Wave” will emerge, characterized by “lone operators” using the internet, cyber tools, and weapons of mass destruction to wreak havoc.[13] More recently, Honig and Yahel argue that “terrorist semi-states” that control territory but continue to launch terrorist attacks internationally (such as the Islamic State) may be the next wave.[14]

While each of these suggestions is plausible, right-wing terror should also be considered as a possible fifth wave, given the recent surge in far-right violence. Does far-right terrorism meet Rapoport’s criteria for this new wave? Is there a clear expansion in that type of terrorism? Is it transnational in character? Is it motivated by an ideology which is identifiable and distinct? Does it differ from earlier forms of right-wing terror? Is it distinguishable from the fourth, religious wave of terrorism?

Defining Right-Wing Terrorism

What is right-wing terrorism? There are many definitions of the far-right, and scholars have offered a variety of ways of thinking about this form of terror. The Institute for Economics & Peace provides a useful summary of the major components of the far-right:

‘Far-right’ refers to a political ideology that is centred on one or more of the following elements: strident nationalism (usually racial or exclusivist in some fashion), fascism, racism, anti-Semitism, anti-immigration, chauvinism, nativism, and xenophobia.[15]

Given these disparate elements, Daniel Byman suggests that “right-wing terrorism should be seen as a label of convenience that lumps together various causes.”[16] Daniel Koehler also agrees that right-wing extremism is best viewed as a “family of ideologies.”[17] Tore Bjørgo and Jacob Aasland Ravndal identify three “families”

of far-right political movements (cultural nationalists, ethnic nationalists, and racial nationalists), while acknowledging that some groups or individuals may embrace more than one of these identities.[18] Perhaps the most useful summary of these ways of understanding far-right terrorism comes from Koehler:

the term right-wing extremism covers a broad range of ideologies that essentially see violence as a legitimate tool to combat a political and ethnic ‘enemy’ (including individuals with different culture, religion, nationality or sexual orientation) seen as a threat to the (*sic*) own race or nation.[19]

Within this right-wing ideological stew, recent data suggest that white supremacists are particularly dangerous. [20] Bjørgo and Ravndal argue that “adherents of racial nationalism, such as neo-Nazis, fascists and white supremacists, figure high among perpetrators of extreme-right violence” and that “racial enemies” were the target of a majority of deadly attacks in Russia and Western Europe.[21] A recent report from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) indicates that 65% of far-right extremists in the U.S. between 1948–2018 espoused a white supremacist ideology.[22] During the period 2009–2018, white supremacists were responsible for 76% of far-right extremist killings in the United States, while anti-government extremists were responsible for 19%.[23] An analysis by START found that white supremacists were responsible for 71.4% of “ideologically motivated homicides committed by Far-Right Extremists” between 2010–2018, with that percentage increasing to 84% for the 2015–2018 timeframe.[24] Parkin, Freilich and Chermak similarly find that white supremacists committed 75% of far-right homicides in 2017.[25]

Finally, it is important to note methodological difficulties in the study of right-wing terrorism. Most databases attempt to discern a dominant ideological orientation of a particular attacker, and to differentiate between hate crimes and terrorism.[26] Since analysts may use different criteria for making these determinations, this inevitably leads to differences in specific numbers of attacks and perpetrators in different studies; however, what is notable is that the basic trends and rough percentages of attacks carried out by far-right extremists are consistent across most studies.[27]

Right-Wing Terror: A Fifth Wave?

Does recent right-wing terror constitute a fifth wave of terrorism? Rapoport himself was unconvinced. Writing in 2016, he responded to critiques that he did not account sufficiently for right-wing terrorism:

How do Right-Wing groups fit into the wave process? Right-Wing groups have been present in every wave. Usually...they fight against wave groups. U.S. Christian groups are part of the Religious Wave. [28]

Rapoport’s argument suggests that rather than a new wave, there are two alternative (although somewhat contradictory) ways to characterize right-wing terrorism: modern right-wing terror is really part of the fourth, religious wave of terrorism; or that it is merely a continuation of long-standing right-wing groups (and that those groups engage in what might be called “non-wave” or “counter-wave” types of terrorism).

To assess these alternatives, it is first necessary to discuss whether right-wing terror has the required characteristics of a wave. Then the argument that right-wing terror is part of the fourth wave will be evaluated. Finally, the contention that modern right-wing terror is simply a continuation of earlier, “non-wave” far-right violence is analyzed.

A new wave?

Does right-wing terrorism meet Rapoport’s criteria for a wave? Has there been an expansion of activity? Is there an identifiable cause of this expansion? Does this terrorism have an international character? Does it have a “common predominant energy” or ideology? The evidence supports the argument that right-wing terror does meet the criteria for a wave.

An expansion of activity: As discussed earlier, almost all measures of far-right terrorism show a significant increase in violent incidents over the past 10–15 years, although the number of right-wing attacks resulting in fatalities has fluctuated.[29] Koehler, for example, documents a sharp rise in right-wing attacks against refugees and mosques in Germany from 2013–15.[30] The data also indicate more organizing and recruiting activities by the far-right, especially using social media, during this period.[31]

A triggering cause: The “unanticipated international political transformation” that has triggered the rise in far-right violence in North America, Western Europe and Australia is the rise in right-wing and populist political movements and concern about rising levels of immigration.[32] Koehler argues convincingly that the Syrian refugee crisis sharply increased violence in Europe since 2012 against immigrants.[33] Two European officials who supported liberal immigration and asylum policies were assassinated. Jo Cox, a Member of Parliament in the United Kingdom, was murdered in June 2016 by a white supremacist who considered Cox a “collaborator” bringing non-whites to Britain.[34] Three years later an official in Germany, Walter Luebcke, was killed by a neo-Nazi opposed to German immigration policies.[35] In Australia, a combination of the perception of increased numbers of Muslim immigrants and the spread of European white supremacist ideology has played an important role.[36] The rise of right-wing political movements and political leaders has provided “mainstreaming” for right-wing views, encouraging extremists to believe that violence would be more acceptable and less risky.[37]

Political developments in the U.S. may also have played a significant role in the recent rise in right-wing terrorism. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security warned in April 2009 that the election of Barack Obama and the economic recession were being used by right-wing groups in the U.S. to increase their recruiting and propaganda activity.[38] Eight years later, the election of Donald Trump was welcomed by many white supremacists in the U.S. as validation of their worldview.[39] Some—such as the terrorist who attacked a Walmart in El Paso, Texas, in response to “the Hispanic invasion of Texas”—consciously echoed the president’s anti-immigrant rhetoric.[40] In Europe also, the election of Trump was seen by some on the far-right as part of a global movement in support of their views.[41]

An international character: The recent expansion of right-wing terrorism is clearly transnational in nature. The fact that there are variations in frequency of attacks, in the nature of the targets or in the specific tactics used in different areas of the world is not significant in determining the transnational nature of the wave; as Rapoport argued, “local aims are common in all waves, but the crucial fact is that other states are simultaneously experiencing similar activities.”[42]

There is little doubt that many right-wing terrorists see themselves as engaged in a transnational struggle. Far-right terrorists invoke predecessors in other countries in justification of their own actions. Anders Breivik, whose 2011 attack in Norway killed 77, is cited as an inspiration by many white supremacists around the world.[43] Crawford and Keen point out that the perpetrator of the Hanau terrorist attack posted a YouTube video in English, specifically addressing an American audience, demonstrating his “intentions to reach a global audience.”[44] Caniglia, Winkler and Metais argue that the attacks in Halle and Hanau were inspired by the attacks in New Zealand and El Paso and that they “signal a global interrelation between far-right extremists’ behavior” and are evidence of “a world-wide, rapidly expanding network of far-right, neo-Nazi, and white supremacy extremists.”[45] Analysts also point to the involvement of some far-right “foreign fighters” in the Ukraine as further evidence of the transnational nature of the movement.[46]

A “common predominant energy”: As Bruce Hoffman pointed out in 1982, right-wing extremists have long been motivated by a hatred of liberal democracy and a desire to create a state “based on authoritarian rule, intense nationalism, and racial purity.”[47] While this goal is still important, in recent years it has been supplemented by the perception of a mortal threat: the impending “great replacement” or genocide of the white race. This is a belief that “white people are at risk of being wiped out through migration, miscegenation or violence.”[48] Western elites (often characterized as globalizers and/or Jews) are seen as complicit in this genocide by promoting increased immigration and multiculturalism.[49] These ideas have been referenced by several recent far-right terrorists in the “manifestos” that they posted just before they conducted their attacks.

Far-right ideology also offers a solution to the danger of “white genocide.” The use of violence is intended to intimidate enemies and to stop immigration, but more broadly it is intended to “awaken” the white race to the danger it faces. The ultimate goal is to provoke a resolution to the crisis: a race war, leading to an ethnically pure white/Aryan homeland.

Part of the religious wave?

Rapoport argued that right-wing terror—or at least terror conducted by “U.S. Christian groups”—is part of the religious wave. But how should we distinguish between “religious” and nonreligious terror groups? While many types of groups have a particular religious tradition as part of their ethnic or racial identity (including second wave groups such as the Irgun or the Irish Republican Army), Heather Gregg has convincingly argued that truly religious groups have unique goals—instigating the apocalypse, creating a theocracy, or cleansing a territory of other religions—that are not shared by nonreligious groups.[50] Similarly, Jones et. al. define religious terrorism as “violence in support of a faith-based belief system.”[51] The relevant question is whether modern far-right terrorists are “religious terrorists” in this sense.

Religious ideology was certainly important for many American right-wing groups in the past. Studies by Bruce Hoffman and Kathleen Belew clearly demonstrated the importance of Christian theology for many far-right groups in the United States from the 1970s and 1990s, including militias, the Christian Patriot and Christian Identity movements, and the Aryan Nations.[52] Religious justification for violence may still be important for some on the far-right today.

But even if Christian theology was central to the ideology of the far-right in America (it was never as important for many European far-right groups), that is not necessarily the case today. Paul Jackson argues that some neo-Nazis now view Christianity as “outdated and irrelevant” to their movement.[53] Hoffman suggests that the far-right in the U.S. is changing, and is less focused on Christian theology or identity. He quotes an analyst of these groups: “The neo-Nazi types of the late 1980s to 2000 are being replaced by Nationalists concerned about immigration—and they are wearing suits and square-rimmed glasses rather than combat boots and red suspenders.”[54] Other studies also suggest that as far-right groups internationalize their operations, “a melding of agendas from different communities” occurs, leading to less salience for Christian Identity theology.[55] Perhaps reflecting this evolution, in detailed discussions of how to define right-wing terror, neither Jones nor Freilich identify modern right-wing terrorists as religious in nature.[56]

Many on the far-right continue to use Christian language and symbols (such as references to the Crusades), but this history is appropriated mostly for recruiting and propaganda purposes.[57] For many on the far-right, Christianity is certainly part of their ethnic or racial identity, just as Catholicism and Protestantism are crucial to the identity of Northern Irish Republicans and Loyalists. But just as the IRA are not considered religious terrorists, neither should most modern right-wing extremists.

Finally, the fact that the fourth wave may still be underway does not disqualify right-wing terror from consideration as a distinct wave. Rapoport’s discussion of waves implied that each wave would follow its predecessor in succession, but the empirical analysis by Rasler and Thompson demonstrates that waves often overlap. They show that the third (leftist) wave was completely coincident with both the final 25 years of the second (anti-colonial/nationalist) wave and the first 15 years of the fourth (religious) wave, and that the second and fourth waves also had considerable overlap.[58] It is therefore perfectly consistent with Rapoport’s wave framework that a fifth wave may have begun during the fourth wave.

Non-wave terrorism?

Is far-right terrorism “non-wave”—a form of terror that exists outside the wave framework but has been “present in every wave”, according to Rapoport? This would suggest that modern right-wing terror is not a new phenomenon, is little different than it was in the past, and cannot be considered a wave.

It is indisputable that far-right terrorists have been active in Europe, North America and Australia for many decades. Rapoport points to the Ku Klux Klan in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Transnational neo-Nazi groups have been active since at least the 1960s.[59] From 1990–99, white supremacists were responsible for 78% of far-right ideologically motivated homicides in the U.S., and they killed as almost many people in that decade (79) as they did from 2000–18 (87) (many more if the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing is included). [60] European right-wing terror has also been motivated by anti-immigrant and anti-Semitic ideas well before 2009; in 1980, far-right extremists were responsible for mass casualty attacks in Bologna, Munich and Paris. [61]

But to dismiss right-wing terror as unchanged, and therefore incapable of having wave characteristics, is to ignore some important developments in the nature of far-right terrorism in the past decade. Two issues deserve attention: changes in the way violence is used, and the new role of social media in transnational right-wing networks.

With notable exceptions such as Bologna and Oklahoma City, right-wing terrorism in the past was “high frequency but low intensity”: there were many incidents but few fatalities.[62] Koehler observed that right-wing terror attacks “usually do not attempt to inflict indiscriminate mass casualties.”[63] He also noted that far-right terrorists rarely claimed credit for their attacks or explain their motives, suggesting that in the eyes of the perpetrators “right-wing attacks are often self-explanatory.”[64]

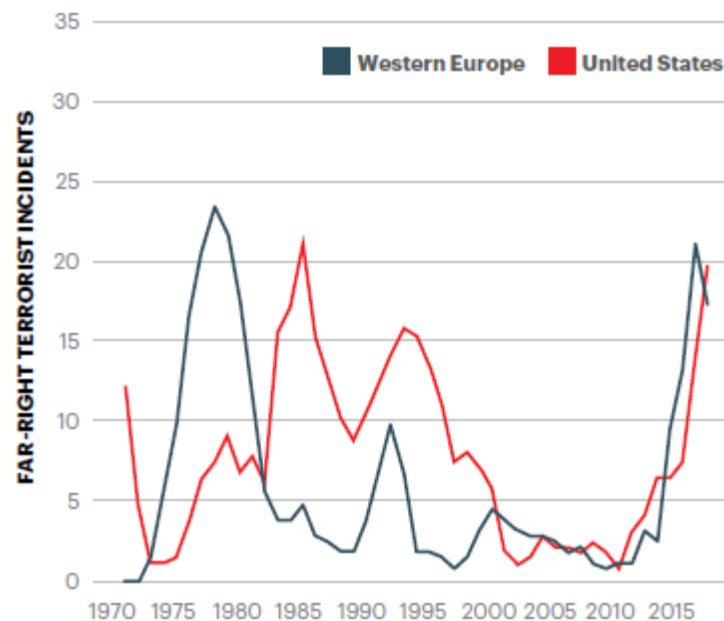
But recently, far-right terrorists have conducted or attempted more mass casualty attacks, setting “a novel standard for a new generation of extreme right terrorists.”[65] Perpetrators have also made a point of posting lengthy “manifestos” on the internet and even livestreaming their attacks to a global audience. Explanations for these frightening developments vary. Some analysts suggest that right-wing terrorists are emulating the methods of jihadist groups, while Crawford and Keen suggest that this new “gamification of mass violence” frames “terrorism as a competitive act” and “incentivize(s) violence as a way of generating subcultural status” among other far-right extremists.[66]

Social media and new technology are transforming the far-right in other ways. While use of the internet among right-wing extremists has existed for decades, social media may be qualitatively altering their self-identity and activities.[67] Hoffman argues that “the threat is evolving rapidly” as social media platforms “unite disparate, disgruntled individuals in an ideologically more cohesive echo chamber.”[68] In this context, “online platforms serve as nonstop, virtual white supremacist rallies where coordination can happen in real time, regardless of location.”[69] Koehler suggests that this facilitates “hive” terrorism, “committed by a spontaneously formed crowd that quickly disbands after the incident” (perhaps the terroristic equivalent of “flash mobs”).[70] More broadly, social media helps to enhance the perception of a global far-right movement with a unified purpose, so that a “challenge previously thought to be predominantly local is acquiring a transnational character.”[71]

Patterns of far-right terror in Europe and the U.S. provide some support for this conclusion. Consider the following graph, from the Institute for Economics & Peace:[72]

Far-right terrorist incidents in the US and western Europe, three-year moving average, 1970–2018

The trend in far-right terrorism in Western Europe is almost identical to the trend in the US.



Source: START GTD. IEP Calculations

Source: Institute for Economics & Peace, *Global Terrorism Index 2019*, p. 50.

The data show that there were significant numbers of far-right terrorist incidents in both Western Europe and the U.S. from the 1970s to the 1990s. It is also clear that the timing and frequency of far-right terror differed in the two regions, with European incidents peaking considerably earlier than those in the U.S. These patterns are consistent with the idea that far-right terrorism was based on local factors, operating in the background of “wave terrorism.”

But the data from 2005–2018 seem to tell a different story. During this period, far-right terrorist activities in the U.S. and Western Europe have moved into synchronization. Might this be evidence of an emerging wave and a change from earlier patterns of far-right violence? It would be consistent with the evidence that white supremacist and other far-right groups in America and Europe are responding to similar concerns about immigration and white “replacement,” and that they are sharing their ideas and plans internationally. While these data are not definitive, they support the argument that a new wave of terrorism exists.

Conclusion

Considerable evidence and analysis support an argument that a fifth, far-right wave of global terrorism may be underway. What developments would weaken this argument? If far-right terror around the globe develops a more explicit religious character, that would support an alternative analysis that right-wing violence is part of the fourth wave. Similarly, if right-wing terrorism declines sharply even as immigration issues persist, that might indicate that the surge in far-right violence is a transient phenomenon based on local political conditions rather than a transnational wave. Future research should continue to examine evidence supporting the idea of a fifth wave, while also looking for those indicators that might disprove the argument.

If this argument is correct, however, governments will need to rethink how they deal with transnational right-wing terrorism. Many of the law enforcement and intelligence tools used against jihadism must be redirected towards right-wing terror, and states must share information and resources across borders in the face of a persistent transnational threat. For if this is a fifth wave, we may be dealing with an enhanced threat from right-wing terror for many years to come.

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Notes

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