ON THE ORIGINS OF WHITE NATIONALISM

What motivates far-right extremism? Sociological studies are giving new insights and ways to tackle the phenomenon. Peter Byrne investigates

TIM ZAAL hurt a lot of people in his time: blacks, Mexicans, gays. Strung out on drugs and propaganda, he fitted the toes of his engineer boots with razor blades, all the better to kick the scum and save the white race.

Zaal has since recanted, but others continue to follow in his footsteps. After decades largely under the radar, race-based violence and extremism is back in the news. In June 2015, white supremacist Dylann Roof killed nine black worshippers at a Methodist church in Charleston, South Carolina. In August 2017, the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, saw youths on the streets giving Nazi salutes, and one counter-protestor killed.

It’s not just in the US. In June 2016, British politician Jo Cox was murdered by a white nationalist. Last November, tens of thousands rallied by torchlight in Warsaw, Poland, waving banners that advocated deporting refugees and making Europe white again, while chanting “Sieg Heil” – in the once-Nazi-occupied land where Auschwitz was built.

For most, the motivations of such hate seem unimaginable. But pioneering work in the US is beginning to reveal its roots. What it is uncovering turns a conventional view of terrorist motivations on its head – with implications for how all societies should deal with the phenomenon.

IT IS a cold night in January, and I’m eating hamburgers with Zaal in a mall restaurant at the border of Orange County and Los Angeles. A big, affable man in his early 50s, he talks easily about his life as a violent white supremacist during the 1980s and 1990s.

Simi first met Zaal when he disengaged from organised racism at the turn of the millennium. Since then, Simi has interviewed Zaal about his life history, as he has done scores of active and former far-right extremists.

The two have common acquaintances, and casually drop names. “Did you know that so-and-so is dead?”

White supremacism has a long tradition in the US. From the 1860s, after the southern Confederate states lost the US civil war, white workers found themselves competing with freed slaves for economic resources and social status. The backlash was often murderous: thousands of black men, women and children were lynched, shot, stabbed, tortured and burned alive, and their property often expropriated with impunity. Racial segregation was the law of the land, not just in the agrarian south, but also in the industrial north as millions of black people fled the cotton fields for factory ghettos. By 1925, membership of the Ku Klux Klan approached 6 million.
about 5 percent of the US population. Orange County is best known as the home of the University of California, Irvine. Its affluent suburbs were long a bastion of old-school Republican conservatism. Richard Nixon was born here and it is where Ronald Reagan kick-started his political career. Until the 1970s, the county was almost exclusively white, before African-American, Hispanic and Asian immigrants changed its complexion. Like similar places nationwide, Orange County became a centre of a small but hardcore white supremacist backslash. Zaal viewed himself as a patriot fighting against a Jewish-orchestrated plot to commit genocide on the white race. “We saw it as doing what police wouldn’t do,” he says. “We were cleaning up our neighbourhoods of the scum.”

Just days before I met Zaal, white supremacist Samuel Woodward was charged with stabbing to death a Jewish gay man called Blaze Bernstein, whose grandparents had fled Nazi Germany. “We saw it as doing what police wouldn’t do,” he says. “We were cleaning up our neighbourhoods of the scum.”

Members of the Rise Above Movement join the rally in Charlottesville.


IN THE wake of the Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, counter terrorism expert Erroll Southers at the University of Southern California wrote an opinion article for USA Today, which linked the violence to Donald Trump’s 

WHAT MAKES A RACIST? Pete Simi’s research among former white supremacists has shown that many experienced childhood emotional trauma and are predisposed to crime. Of the 103 people he studied:

- Half report witnessing serious acts of violence growing up
- Half report experiencing emotional and/or physical abuse during childhood
- One-quarter report being sexually abused during childhood
- Half report being expelled or dropping out of school
- Three-quarters report a history of physical aggression before they got involved in far-right politics
- Half were shoplifters or petty criminals
- Slightly less than half report a family history of mental health problems
- Two-thirds report substance abuse issues
- Two-thirds report attempting suicide

rationalised rhetoric. The next day, someone shot out his front door.

Southerners are black. A retired FBI agent, he teaches courses on homogenous terrorism to law enforcement. “White nationalists are a greater threat to Americans than jihadists,” he says. “The Anti Defamation League reports that in the US, white supremacists were responsible for 18 of 34 terrorist murders in 2017. Seven of the remaining 16 were anti-government extremists, leaving nine tied to Islamist terrorism. Since 2002, there have been three times as many deadly far-right terrorist attacks than jihadist attacks in the US. Although the jihadist attacks have claimed more victims overall, reports the New America Foundation.

In the UK in the year to March 2017, right-wing extremists made up around one in six of 6000 referrals to the country’s counter-extremism programme. Prevent, and almost 40 per cent of 342 people entering Prevent’s “Channel” process, which supports individuals considered vulnerable to be drawn into terrorism. In February this year, police said they had foiled four far-right terrorist plots in the UK in the previous 12 months.

In the US, the Southern Poverty Law Center, which monitors hate groups, has catalogued more than 600 active neo-Nazi and white supremacist groups and hundreds of anti-government militias that either have a stated intention to overthrow liberal democracy or historically engaged in armed struggle. Southerns sees similarities between the white extremist and Islamist terrorists: both fit the prevailing notion among researchers that most terrorists are not psychopaths, but relatively typical people motivated by circumstance to protect their “in-group” from dangers, real or imagined. “Given their belief systems, both types of terrorists are acting rationally,” he says. “Most terrorists are ‘altruists’ who view themselves as soldiers fighting for a noble cause.” "The calling to enact political change precedes the calling to violence: the ends justify the means. Simi’s research suggests that is not the whole story.

SIMI and I are hiking with “Chuck” (not his real name) on a rocky beach north of San Diego. Chuck is a 50-year-old electrician who used to advocate Christian identity, the idea that white Europeans are the last tribe of Israel. As an adolescent, Chuck listened to white power punk, hung out with swastika-tattooed neo-Nazi bikers and was into weed, amphetamines, LSD, magic mushrooms and alcohol. He was discharged from the US Navy after he was sentenced for assaulting a Mexican man— for being Mexican, he adds. On release from prison, Chuck joined the San Diego branch of the Hammerskin Nation, an ultra-violent neo-Nazi group with international branches. He ran in the same head-slaming circles as Zaal, but he was more enamoured of the cross than the swastika. “I did not consider myself to be a national socialist, but a Christian patriot ready to start a race war and take the country back from the Jewish community.”

As Chuck grew older, raising a family, he began distancing himself from violent extremism. There was no blinding light, just a fading of interest until six days he no longer believed in a world conspiracy. He has been active with Life After Hate, a group that offers “off-ramps” and counselling to far-right extremists who want to heal. Simi has a professional background in mental health assessment. His interviewees start by talking about themselves in an unstructured way, to uncover their life priorities and emotional impulses. This is followed by more structured, factual questioning about past events, which probes subjects’ emotional motivations. It is rare to get such an insight into the minds of those who hold these kinds of extreme views. When terrorist suspects are interviewed about their pasts, it is usually by intelligence and police agencies, often in prison and with a focus on ideology and operational methods.

Simi and his team record the emotions associated with events the subjects mention such as family trauma, hurting people, or joining or leaving a violent group. They can then determine the intensity of pleasure or pain the events evoked, as revealed in the language used. The results are digitised for statistical analysis to uncover the essential factors of causes and effects.

The first results from this programme were laid out in 2016, in a 260-page paper from the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START), principally authored by Simi, with the title “Recruitment and Radicalization among US Far Right Terrorists.” The analysis revealed that white extremists, while not necessarily psychopaths, are often violent before they join extremist groups. Only after joining are they generally schooled in ideologies that justify channeling pre-existing urges into violence towards Jewish people, non-white people and anti-racist groups. The ideology is the excuse for ultra-violence, not the reason. “Far-right ideologies channel a pre-existing need to express violence by narrowing the selection of victims,” says Simi. That insight comes in the realization on the origins of extremism, says ethnographer Kathleen Blie of the University of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, whose research focuses on female white supremacists (see “Women of the right”, page 39). “It shows that the embrace of those really terrible ideas could be a consequence of an immersion in the culture, rather than the cause of the really attractive ideas to the culture,” she says.

Simi’s analysis tease out the possible driving factors. About 80 per cent of his interviewees have experienced childhood emotional trauma, sexual abuse and broken homes (see “What makes a racist?”, left). Many had horrible, self-centred experiences that morphed into lonely, self-hating adulthoods. White power groups can provide angry loners with a sense of pride in community and conveniently dehumanised targets to blame. White supremacist propaganda is filled with references to collective shame related to feelings of cultural, racial and economic disadvantage, from the Confederacy’s defeat in the civil war to the election of Barack Obama as the first non-white US president.

“I believed I was doing something noble, altruistic, that I was dedicating my life to my people, to my race… It wasn’t like, ‘Hey, I’m a hater and I’m proud of it.’”

(Donald, White Aryan Resistance)

“We’re here to defend God and the people... not oppressing or taking over.”

(Calle, American Front)

“Fighting is a lot like a hug. It makes you feel good… It’s always been that way. Ever since I got the *** beat out of me as a teenager.”

(Stanley, United Society of Aryan Struggle)

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It wasn’t about the racism... I knew the whole time that it wasn’t right... But to be accepted, to feel like I belonged...”

(Kevin, Blood and Honor)

“...It was more fashion than politics by a huge factor.”

(Jacqueline, Society Skin Nation)

“We’re running by yourself in the streets. It’s the camaraderie that draws you in, at first. And then once you see what’s really going on in the world politically... you’re like, well, now, I’ve got something to believe in, something to defend, the white race! You feel invincible even when you are getting all beat to s*** by cops or anti-racist skins.”

(Logan, Public Enemy No 1)

“The behavioural problems represent lives spinning out of control,” says Simi. “Resorting to violent extremism can be a coping mechanism for these people. They are drawn toward violent extremist groups for rational ideological reasons, for moral protection, a sense of family.”

He is now turned with Chuck. His parents, he says, were pot-smoking hippies who failed to recognise that his black baby-sitter was sexually molesting him on a regular basis. “I just kind of buried that, and it turned into shame and then anger and then self-hate that got projected onto the world.”

The sun sets and he rides away on his motorbike. “Most of these guys are not crazed lunatics,” says Simi. “But neither are they socially or psychologically healthy. They carry invisible scars.”

SOCIOLOGICAL research on extremists is difficult to design. Researchers cannot advertise for “Nazis” or “violent white supremacists” to join a scientific study. Simi developed his volunteer cohorts of active and former extremists by gaining trust from everyday paranoiacs who meet one interview at a time. Interviewees then suggested others who met this criterion in a method called “snowballing.”

This is not a randomised process. It is a long process. Most of his subjects are not typical in their background or logical thought processes. His studies of individual lives differ in method and level of detail from his previous real-time, ethnographic observations of active white supremacists.

Starting in the mid-1990s, Simi was a student in a debate team. He was involved in both institutional boards, and Simi’s studies are required not to cause harm to his subjects. His studies of individual life histories differ in method and level of detail from his previous real-time, ethnographic observations of active white supremacists.

But not every white supremacist with these risk factors opens fire on a minority church congregation, or points their car at an anti-fascist protester and accelerates. “The idea of predicting something as complicated and as rare as terrorism is just not realistic,” says Simi. Terrorism is primed when an emotionally damaged person meets the wrong people in the wrong place at the wrong time.

ZAAD had just that time for his violent deeds, and now regularly tells the story of how he deradicalised at the Los Angeles Museum of Tolerance. But the Charlottesville march triggered something deep inside him. The chaos and hatred in the streets terrified most people. For a moment, Zaad thrilled at the prospect that the revolution might finally be on. “Such momentary raptures are not uncommon,” says Simi.

In 2017, Simi and Blee, together with colleagues Matthew DeMichelle and Steven Windisch, presented a study of former white supremacists in American Sociological Review. They wrote that “the habitual and unwanted thoughts, feelings, physiological responses, and behavior that can follow exist” in such contexts. This mirrors the effects of withdrawing from opiate addiction. It may be no coincidence that, as Simi’s earlier studies showed, many white supremacists are also substance abusers: the reward of hate may be dopamine, too.

In an unpublished pilot for a future study, Simi and collaborators at the University of Nebraska and the National Institutes of Health have taken fMRI and EEG scans of the brains of five of his former white supremacists and a control group of five mixed martial artists whose brains were likely to show similar signs of trauma. The volunteers were shown symbols and images designed to be neutral or to activate the former white supremacists’ previous identity and ideological orientation. The experiment found significant activation in the emotion processing regions of the brains of the former white supremacists in response to racially charged images, such as of an interracial couple. No such regions were activated for the control group.

The researchers conclude that “the inherent racial bias in former white supremacists happens before more active cognitive processing.”

In her 2016 book Inside Organised Fascism, Blee observes that “the mainstay of any substantial racist movement is not the pathological individual but rather a pathological vein of racism, intolerance, and bigotry in the largest population. That is why the movement successfully mines”. Unconscious bias towards protecting our in-group is a natural, evolutionarily adaptive feature of the human psyche, and the wellbeing of the group... They are the extreme values in a Bell curve that covers all forms of social racism. That provides at least some handle on the individual’s behaviour, both through tackling childhood trauma and rootouting our racism in society as a whole.

For Zaad, the path out of his addiction to hatred opened up unexpectedly after he became a parent. “I was with my 5-year-old at a grocery store. And he says, ‘Look, Daddy, there’s a big- and-Repugnant white people’ in the store. The black guy just walks away, shaking his head. But all of these little white ladies are screaming and hollering at me. I mean old ladies. ‘Oh, how dare you! How dare you teach your child this thing!’ And my son looks up at me and says ‘aren’t you going to upset them, Daddy?’ That was my moment of clarity.”

Peter Byrne is a journalist based in northern California.