

FROM THE GROUND UP: COMBATting THE RISE OF RIGHT- WING TERROR

BY VICTORIA DESIMONE

Right-wing terrorism is on the rise in the United States and across Europe. In the United States, right-wing extremists were responsible for nearly 50 killings in 2018, a 26 percent increase over the previous year.^{1,2} According to the Anti-Defamation League's latest report, 2018 was the fourth-deadliest year for domestic extremist-related killings since 1970 and of those attacks, right-wing extremists were responsible for almost 78 percent.³ In Europe, the story is just as grim, with attacks by right-wing groups increasing 43 percent between 2016 and 2017.⁴ According to the 2018 European Union Terrorism Situation

and Trend Report, right-wing extremism is continuing to expand.⁵

Within this trend, attacks committed by ethno-nationalists and separatist groups have increased and continue to outnumber attacks inspired by other ideologies.⁶ A CSIS report published in November 2018 identified several factors driving the phenomenon, including the increased use of social media and the Internet to connect and disseminate information, overseas travel to meet with likeminded individuals, and the elections of President Barak Obama and President Donald Trump.⁷ Whether individuals are easily exposed to extremist ideas over social media or concerned about immigration by refugees, it's clear that the United States must improve and hone its strategy to combat this type of terrorism.⁸

According to the National Strategy for Counterterrorism (NSCT) report published in October 2018, the White House acknowledged the increase in domestic terrorism across the country, including instances with right-wing motivations as well as animal rights extremism, environmental extremism, sovereign citizen extremism, and militia extremism.⁹ This is a noteworthy change, considering that domestic terrorism has not been included in previous NSCT reports.¹⁰ Although the current administration has been criticized for failing to acknowledge cases of domestic terror, its inclusion in the NSCT represents an important step forward.

Although there is no single definition for what constitutes right-wing terrorism, it can broadly be defined as:

violence in support of the belief that personal and/or national way of life is under attack and is either already lost or that the threat is imminent. Characterized by anti-globalism, racial, or ethnic supremacy or nationalism, suspicion of centralized federal authority, reverence for individual liberty, and/or belief in conspiracy theories that involve grave threat to national sovereignty and/or personal liberty.¹¹

Violence committed by right-wing extremists continues to account for most domestic terrorism in the United States, as opposed to left-wing violence, which only accounted for 3.2 percent of all domestic terrorism between 2009 and 2018.^{12,13} This article provides a comparative analysis of two well-known programs to counter violent extremism (CVE) that specifically target right-wing extremists and that have been found to be effective in the United States and in Europe. The article additionally will argue that the U.S. government should support and empower NGO-driven initiatives that address right-wing extremism to advance a holistic and effective policy to counter violent extremism.

EXIT-DEUTSCHLAND VS. LIFE AFTER HATE

There are several NGOs in the United States and in Europe that are working to combat right-wing extremist groups.^{14,15} Two particularly effective programs are the German-based EXIT-Deutschland initiative and U.S.-based Life After Hate initiative.

U.S. GOVERNMENT SHOULD SUPPORT AND EMPOWER NGO-DRIVEN INITIATIVES THAT ADDRESS RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM TO ADVANCE A HOLISTIC AND EFFECTIVE POLICY TO COUNTER VIOLENT EXTREMISM.

EXIT-Deutschland has proven successful in deradicalizing and preventing right-wing extremism in Germany.¹⁶ The EXIT approach was first established in Norway in 1997 and, after its success there, was implemented elsewhere in Europe.¹⁷ The program was founded in 2000 by criminologist Bernd Wagner and Ingo Hasselbach, a former neo-Nazi movement leader.¹⁸ It provides personalized assistance such as therapy, career counseling, and social support systems to individuals seeking to leave right-wing extremist movements. In turn, participants in the program advise law enforcement agencies on right-wing recruitment tactics, provide seminars to schools around Germany, and work with communities to prevent radicalization.¹⁹ EXIT has a hands-off approach to recruitment. Interested individuals must initiate contact on their own accord to demonstrate that they are ready and willing to leave extremist movements with which they are affiliated.²⁰

In addition to public donations, the organization receives funding for several projects from Germany's Federal Ministry for Family, Senior Citizens, Women, and Youth.²¹ The German government commissioned an assessment of EXIT's work and found that only about 3 percent of the roughly 500 individuals who had participated in the program later re-engaged in extremist activities. The assessment also found that EXIT was more successful than the state-funded deradicalization program of the German Internal Intelligence Service.²² EXIT-Deutschland's success has led to the creation of several other chapters around the world, including one in the United States. In 2014, EXIT-USA became affiliated with Life After Hate.

Life After Hate was founded by former right-wing extremist members in 2011. Through education, outreach, and research, Life After Hate's goal is to interrupt violence committed under the auspices of religious or ideological beliefs.²³ There are several affiliated programs including the Strong Cities Network, Formers Anonymous, the Against Violent Extremism Network, and EXIT-USA.^{24,25,26} EXIT-USA provides services similar to those administered by EXIT-Deutschland, including public service campaigns, training, education, and community programs to help individuals get back on their feet.²⁷

It is important to note that Life After Hate was awarded a \$400,000 grant from the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) under a program called Countering Violent Extremism. However, the grant was reassigned in 2017. Life After Hate was excluded from the list of new award recipients.²⁸ Shortly after the award was rescinded, supporters donated more than \$500,000 to sustain the program's work.²⁹ According to the Life After Hate website, since the 2017 "Unite the Right" rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, more than 150 men and women have reached out to the organization for help and support.³⁰

EXIT-DEUTSCHLAND AND LIFE AFTER HATE HAVE MORE SIMILARITIES THAN DIFFERENCES. . . . WHAT IS INTERESTING IS THEIR ABILITY TO THRIVE IN VERY DIFFERENT POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS.

EXIT-Deutschland and Life After Hate have more similarities than differences. Both programs are run by NGOs and use similar recruitment models. Both provide counseling services, education opportunities, community outreach, and other kinds of social support. What is interesting is their ability to thrive in very different political and historical contexts. For example, Germany has some remarkably strict restrictions on speech and expression when it comes to right-wing extremism. There also is a legal concept called "Volksverhetzung," which states that anyone who denigrates or promotes violence towards an individual or

group based on ethnicity or religion could be sentenced up to five years in jail.³¹ It is understandable why Germany has such strict laws but this type of legislation doesn't exist in the United States.

Another interesting difference is that the United States has a very different political culture than Germany. There are numerous political parties that support far-right ideologies, like the Alternative for Germany (AfD) and the National Democratic Party, that play an active role in Germany's political system.^{32,33} An NPR article from September 2018 found that the AfD was the second most-popular party in a recent poll.³⁴ There is no political party in the United States that supports extremism of any kind. Moreover, a Pew Research Center poll found that both Republicans and Democrats detest terrorism.³⁵ For both EXIT-Deutschland and Life After Hate to thrive in such different environments shows that the programs can be successful despite different environmental factors.

A final difference between the two programs is that EXIT-Deutschland receives funding from the German government.³⁶ As mentioned above, Life After Hate received a grant from DHS but it was later rescinded.

RECOMMENDATION

The research findings are mixed on whether CVE programs accomplish what they were intended to do.³⁷ In the United States, many have argued that CVE is an area in which government generally falls short relative to other countries.³⁸ The above comparison shows that in this instance, the United States is not that far from what Germany is doing with its CVE programs. However, there is an important caveat. NGOs typically are more in tune with local needs and grievances of the communities in which they operate. Therefore, law enforcement and government agencies could be at a disadvantage in addressing right-wing extremism without the collaboration of local NGOs. For example, the program run by the German Internal Intelligence Service was found to be far less successful than EXIT-Deutschland because individuals feared punishment or other negative consequences that were absent in the context of a non-government led program.³⁹ Policymakers should dedicate resources to organizations like Life After Hate that have shown measurable progress at the ground level. The government can support these efforts by awarding them federal grants, which could have a positive impact on their work and the individuals whom they help.

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ENDNOTES

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