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Comparing the Red Army Faction to modern-day terrorists: bringing the 'Analysen zum Terrorismus' back into scholarly debate

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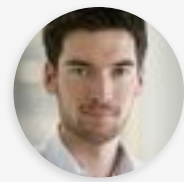
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The logo of the Red Army Faction



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Do extremists and terrorists separated by ideology and time period resemble one another? Are their backgrounds and biographical details comparable, or is variation the key theme? This blog summarizes a study that compared left-, right- and jihadist extremists and terrorists.

Introduction

One popular theory on the development of modern-day terrorism describes it as a [wave-like phenomenon](#). After the 3rd wave of ‘new left’-inspired terrorism petered out in the early 1990s with the fall of communism, the 4th wave of ‘religious’ terrorism came to the fore. However, while Rapoport’s ‘wave theory’ has provided fertile ground for [discussing terrorism’s historical development](#), is not without critique. Scholars have debated, for instance, the appropriateness of creating distinctive categories of terrorism and whether or not we’ve actually passed into a [5th wave](#) characterized by right-wing extremist violence. Another issue raised by distinguishing between extremist movements and their terrorist outgrowths based on their overarching ideologies, is whether the motivations and backgrounds of those who join show appreciable differences. In other words, did those who joined groups like the infamous West-German [Rote Armee Fraktion \(RAF\)](#) differ markedly from contemporary jihadist or neo-Nazi extremists? A recently published paper explores this question by drawing comparisons between a dataset on contemporary extremists and terrorists, and one compiled on mostly left-wing extremists in West-Germany of the 1960s and 1970s as part of the *Analysen zum Terrorismus* (analyses of terrorism).

The makings of a terrorist

Ulrike Meinhof, Gudrun Ensslin, Andreas Baader and other members of the RAF were never far from the headlines in the West-Germany of the 1970s. After the dramatic highpoint of the government’s fight against the RAF during [1977’s ‘hot autumn’](#), the authorities set in motion a series of studies into the backgrounds and motives of the left-wing (and, to a much more limited degree, right-wing) extremists and terrorist who had presented the country with its largest post-World War 2 crisis. Although the five volumes of the *Analysen zum Terrorismus*, and the multitude of authors who contributed to it, make it one of the largest studies into the causes of terrorism ever commissioned, the project’s impact on the scholarly debate has, for several reasons, been limited. The project was met with [skepticism](#) when it was announced, with critics seeing it as lacking objectivity or being one-sided in its analysis. Methodologically, the volume presenting the biographical characteristics of 250 terrorists (mostly from the RAF) was roundly criticized for its simplicity and for lacking source transparency. As a result, more [contemporary mentions](#) of the project often single out this particular volume and associate it with a degree of unreliability that has precluded the *Analysen* from achieving a wider impact.

In our view, while the *Analysen*’s limitations certainly need to be acknowledged, the project still has considerable potential to inform research on terrorism and extremism. In late 2021, we began exploring the feasibility of drawing a comparison between the biographical details found in the *Analysen* and [data that we ourselves had collected](#) over a period of 2-years on contemporary right-wing and jihadist extremists and terrorists. If we focused on the least controversial data presented in the *Analysen* (principally, descriptive information related to their sample’s background in terms of age, sex, educational attainment etc.), would we find a range of *differences* or mostly *similarities* with our own sample? Would the results of such a comparison speak to a common ‘type’ of extremist and terrorist, identifiable across time periods and ideologies, or demonstrate the ways in which context shapes who radicalizes and how they do so?

The resulting paper was [published in the journal *Deviant Behavior*](#) this summer and our findings emphasized, that an archetypical extremist or terrorist ‘profile’ could not be identified. For instance, in terms of their socioeconomic backgrounds, as well as their educational achievements, we found a considerable degree of variety. At the time, for instance, the high number of university students among groups like the RAF stood in marked contrast to the much more poorly educated West-German right-wing extremists. Within our own study, however, we no longer found such a contrast as the majority of right-wing and jihadist extremists in our sample had completed upper-secondary education or gone to university. We were also unable to report marked differences between our samples and the broader population in terms of, for instance, criminal behavior. Interestingly, we also observed a number of commonalities across the samples, even if only tentatively. Compared to non-radicalized peers, extremists and terrorists appear more likely to be unemployed, and to have had adverse childhood experiences, such as the death of a parent.

Our study also tried to go beyond direct, individual-level comparisons to look at the broader contexts in which extremism and terrorism can emerge. Like the authors of the *Analysen*, we emphasized that socialization into groups and broader milieus that support (or even advocate) the use of political violence are key elements of an individual’s turn to terrorist violence. Similarly, an appreciation of the broader socio-political setting is crucial to understand why and how protest movements and their violent extremist offspring arise. There is a longstanding stereotype of terrorists as being intrinsically different from the ‘average citizen’, particularly in terms of mental-health issues, that [holds up poorly to close scrutiny](#). While there is certainly value in assessing whether certain biographical experiences or personality characteristics form risk factors for radicalization, care must be taken not to see this phenomenon as something that can be reduced to psychological abnormalities. We hope that our study is able to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of who, but also *under what circumstances*, radicalization and terrorism become more likely.

EXTREMISM

TERRORISM

RAF

ANALYSEN ZUM TERRORISMUS

COMPARATIVE RESEARCH

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