

Evaluating Atomwaffen Division Using the Grievance-Ideology-Mobilization Model

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Abstract

As radicalization into hate groups grows in the United States, it is becoming increasingly important to have a framework to assess how these groups come to be. Founded in 2015, Atomwaffen Division is a rapidly growing neo-Nazi hate group based in the United States with members in several countries around the world. With their far-reaching influence and focus on violence to achieve their goals, Atomwaffen Division has become an important case study through which one can understand similar groups. The Grievance-Ideology-Mobilization model by Peter Neumann is used to examine such groups by looking at the various grievances, ideologies, and mobilization tactics used by hate groups to recruit new members, gain traction, and enact change on the world. Through the Grievance-Ideology-Mobilization model, this paper will examine the hate group Atomwaffen Division to aid in the development and implementation of deradicalization procedures for hate groups in North America.

Keywords: hate groups, violent extremism, Grievance-Ideology-Mobilization model,

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In 2021, the Southern Poverty Law Center identified 54 neo-Nazi hate groups in the United States of America (Southern Poverty Law Center, 2023). Of these groups, the group Atomwaffen Division (AWD) has distinguished itself by establishing cells in several US states, Canada, the United Kingdom, Germany, Russia, Ukraine, and the Baltic States, making it one of the farthest-reaching neo-Nazi groups based in the United States (The Soufan Center, 2020). In addition to their international influence, the AWD views violence as the only method to achieve their goal of creating a new society centered around neo-Nazi ideals (Stanford University, 2022). Due to their growing influence and focus on extreme violence, AWD is a group that should be examined in-depth. The grievance-ideology-mobilization (GIM) model by Peter Neumann evaluates the process of radicalization by assessing the grievances, ideologies, and mobilization tactics of a group (Chaudhry, 2023). Using Neumann's model, this paper will assess the hate group Atomwaffen Division.

Grievances

A grievance is a tension or crisis a particular group or individual feels, or in simpler terms, the grievance is what a group or individual is upset about (Chaudhry, 2023). Given AWD's reach across several states and countries, each cell may focus more on a particular grievance than others, but the primary grievances among all groups is the perceived cultural and racial displacement of the white race and Jewish control of global affairs, otherwise known as the International Jewish conspiracy (Anti-Defamation League, 2018; Stanford University, 2022).

The perceived displacement of the white race has its roots in the Great Replacement theory, which argues that white European populations are being replaced through mass

immigration, mostly by Muslim populations (Davey & Ebner, 2019). This theory made its way to the United States through the closely linked concept of white genocide, which was popularized by white supremacist David Lane. White genocide posits a similar replacement of the white race in the United States; however, it differs from the Great Replacement theory through its focus on the anti-Semitic conspiracy that an international Jewish cabal is orchestrating the replacement. This belief strengthens the groups second major grievance.

The grievance of perceived control of international affairs by a Jewish cabal originated in 1905 with the publication of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, which detailed fabricated meetings of Jewish leaders discussing secret plans for Jewish people to rule the world through manipulating the economy, controlling the media, and creating religious conflict (United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, n.d.) This publication was spread worldwide, and despite continuous efforts to combat the anti-Semitic attitudes created by the *Protocols*, it remains a common explanation for individuals looking to cope with uncertainty in society.

While these grievances are the ones highlighted by the group themselves, one may infer these tensions may come from uncontrollable concerns that allow for cognitive openings. As described by Neumann, a cognitive opening is a vulnerable gap where an individual is receptive to alternative ideas that help make sense of their grievance (Chaudhry, 2023). While individuals in AWD may feel as though their main grievance is the replacement of the white race, it is possible their uncertainty about society led to cognitive openings, which then resulted in endorsing conspiracies that gave them a tangible way to control their concern. For example, at the core of the Great Replacement theory lies a concern about immigration (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Since individuals are often unable to address concerns about immigration in a way meaningful to them, they feel an uncertainty that results in a cognitive opening. Given that

uncertainty is related to conspiracy thinking, the jump from immigration concerns to concerns about the status of one's race because of immigration is not a difficult one (Kofta et al., 2020). A similar line of reasoning can be applied to the AWD's second grievance. Kofta et al. (2020) examined the role of political uncontrollability in predicting Jewish conspiracies and found evidence to suggest individuals with a higher level of political uncontrollability (meaning they feel a lack of control in the political domain) were more likely to approve of conspiracy theories about Jewish people. Through this finding, one may infer that many of the AWD members original grievance was a lack of political control, which resulted in a cognitive opening that made the International Jewish conspiracy enticing.

Ideologies

Usually built off a cognitive opening, an ideology is a way for individuals and groups to provide context to and cope with their grievance (Chaudhry, 2023). AWD ascribe to neo-Nazi (also known as national socialist) and white supremacist accelerationist ideologies (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-a).

Neo-Nazi ideologies are characterized by an idolization of Nazi Germany and Adolf Hitler, and involve a hatred for minorities, women, LGBTQ+ populations, and most saliently, the Jewish community (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-b). Neo-Nazism in the United States was primarily promoted through the creation of the American Nazi Party in 1959, which used the International Jewish conspiracy to promote anti-government sentiments (Leibo, 2017). These anti-government sentiments lead neo-Nazi groups to reject democracy in favor of establishing a new society based on fascist ideals (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-b).

The way in which neo-Nazi groups plan to create the new fascist society differs from group to group; however, recent groups (including AWD) have been favoring more violent approaches (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-b). White supremacist accelerationism is an ideology that views modern society as irredeemable, advocating for the collapse of society through violent means to make way for a new all-white fascist society (Miller, 2020). Although the concept of acceleration has existed for many years as a Marxist philosophy positing the inevitable self-destruction of capitalism, it has recently been adopted by white supremacist groups as a way to manage their grievance of the perceived replacement of the white race (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Additionally, accelerationists advocate for general societal chaos, as destabilization can allow for more suitable conditions for a revolution to take place. AWD have used accelerationism in their manifesto to advocate for violence offline, as opposed to acts done online, as they believe each member should be armed for and ideally, trained to fight during the inevitable collapse of society (Stanford University, 2022).

Violent extremists often use 5 crisis narratives to generate support for their cause: conspiracy, dystopia, impurity, existential threat, and apocalypse (Berger, 2018). The Great Replacement theory makes use of the first 4 but does not include a narrative around apocalypse (Davey & Ebner, 2019). Accelerationism provides the 5th crisis narrative, and in doing so, generates an urgency used by AWD to instill beliefs about the collapse of society and recruit vulnerable individuals to support their cause. By looking at the theory through an accelerationist ideology, AWD can cope with the perceived replacement of the white race and be comforted by the future establishment of a white ethnostate based on neo-Nazi principles.

As said by Neumann, the GIM model is not intended to be a step-by-step model for understanding radicalization (Schanzer, n.d.). Although one might argue that AWDs grievances

led to them choosing neo-Nazi and accelerationist ideologies to cope, the opposite can be equally as true: inclinations toward neo-Nazi and accelerationist ideologies may have resulted in their primary grievances. The GIM model is interested in how the 3 factors of grievance, ideology, and mobilization can lead to radicalization; therefore, the order in which grievance and ideology occur is less important than their presence.

Mobilization

Mobilization is where grievance and ideology meet (Chaudhry, 2023). It provides an opportunity for individuals to act on their grievance, using the parts of their ideology to justify the mobilization. Mobilization can manifest in a variety of ways, including voting, protesting, direct violence, and indirect violence. Additionally, individuals may be motivated to create or join a group based on shared grievances and ideology, as Brandon Russell did with the creation of AWD on the Internet forum Iron March in 2015 (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-a; Stern, 2016). Stern (2016) found multiple risk factors correlated with support of violent activism, including social isolation and time spent on the Internet. Given that social isolation offline often can lead to seeking social belonging online, Stern's findings provide a foundational base from which one can understand how Russell mobilized to create AWD and how individuals with similar grievances and ideologies mobilized to join AWD (Mølmen & Ravndal, 2021).

Though AWD's mobilization formally started by establishing themselves as a presence on Iron March, their first offline mobilization consisted of leaving flyers around major universities to recruit new members (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-a). These flyers overtly displayed their anti-Semitism and neo-Nazi views, some of them including the tagline "Join your local Nazis!" (Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-a).

Apart from their early flyering campaign, AWD has mobilized in predominantly violent ways, as is expected of individuals with accelerationist views (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). This has included the creation of hate camps, direct violence leading to homicide, and terroristic activity intended to create societal chaos (Fenton, 2023; Southern Poverty Law Center, n.d.-a).

The creation of AWDs hate camps in 2017 was a way of mobilizing both their grievance with the perceived replacement of the white race as well as their ideology of accelerationism (Stanford University, 2022). These hate camps used military-style training to prepare members for the eventual violence and survival that would come with the collapse of society (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). Additionally, the hate camps were intended to serve as an indoctrination technique for new members and to give opportunities to generate content for propaganda and recruitment resources. Although the first camp did not have many attendees, soon other camps were held in at least 3 states.

AWDs violent ideology has affected the public as they mobilized through direct action on individuals who disapproved of the group as well as ideological targets (Stanford University, 2022). In December 2017, 17-year-old Nicholas Giampa shot and killed his girlfriend's parents after they uncovered his neo-Nazi views and attempted to intervene in the relationship (Schulberg & O'Brien, 2018). Giampa had been using Twitter to endorse neo-Nazi views as well as violence against Jewish people and transgender individuals. Although his membership to AWD was not public, an anonymous AWD member confirmed Giampa's communication with the group (Thompson et al., 2018a). The following month 20-year-old Samuel Woodward stabbed to death Blaze Bernstein, an openly gay Jewish 19-year-old. Woodward was a member of AWD since early 2016, he attended meetings, hate camps, and reportedly helped organize some AWD members in California. Additionally, Woodward was openly anti-Semitic, describing

himself as a “national socialist” or neo-Nazi. The homicide of Bernstein was celebrated by other members of AWD on private online chats, suggesting that Woodward’s act could potentially go on to inspire “copycat crimes” (crimes that are similar in intent and nature to Woodward’s) that would boost AWDs membership (Thompson et al., 2018b). Both Giampa and Woodward’s mobilization to violence exemplify how they used their ideology rooted in violence to justify and act on their grievances.

Accelerationist views also endorse societal chaos through violence and destruction to speed up the collapse of society (Anti-Defamation League, 2019). Because of this, members of the AWD have engaged in acts intending to cause destruction and terror. Brandon Russell—AWDs founder—was arrested in 2017 for explosives charges and suspicion of planning a terrorist attack, he was later convicted for illegally storing explosives and possessing a destructive device (U.S. Department of Justice, 2018). His terroristic intent was corroborated by Russell’s former roommate and AWD member, Devon Arthurs, stating the explosives were intended to be used by Russell and other AWD members to bomb infrastructure. Benjamin Bogard, another member of AWD, displayed inclinations towards mass violence (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). On Twitter he described himself as a “future mass shooter” and expressed his desire to bomb the state capitol (Weill, 2019). His mobilization toward violence prompted a counterterrorism investigation by the FBI, which led to Bogard being charged with possession of child pornography (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). Soon after being released from prison in 2021, Brandon Russell was charged with conspiracy to damage an energy facility in February 2023 (Wendling, 2023). This attack would have decimated Maryland’s energy grid, leaving citizens without power or heat for potentially days. These examples serve to show how

AWDs mobilization to violence according to their accelerationist ideology have consequences not only for targeted individuals, but society as a whole.

Following the arrests of multiple AWD leadership members in February 2020, the group announced their disbandment (Stanford University, 2022). Later in March 2020, AWD rebranded as the National Socialist Order (NSO) under the remaining AWD leadership (Anti-Defamation League, 2018). The new group plans to continue AWDs neo-Nazi and accelerationist goal of ushering in societal collapse to allow for the establishment of a white ethnostate (Makuch, 2020).

Conclusion

Using Neumann's grievance-ideology-mobilization model, this paper assessed the hate group Atomwaffen Division. The group's primary grievances are the perceived replacement of the white race and Jewish control of geopolitics. These grievances are confirmed and strengthened by their neo-Nazi and accelerationist ideologies, which both provide a way for the group members to redirect their concerns toward mobilization in predominantly violent approaches. As more individuals organize into hate groups in the United States and Canada, Neumann's GIM model provides a conceptual framework from which the groups core features may be broken down and understood, which can assist in developing and implementing deradicalization procedures.

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