

The Idea of Terror: Institutional Reproduction in Government Responses to Political Violence

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Despite the recent global uptick in white supremacist terrorism, governments continue to face accusations of not taking the threat seriously, either discursively or in terms of policy responses. Why do acts of white supremacist violence consistently fail to constitute turning points for policy change? Rather than considering acts of political violence as critical junctures for change, I argue that such acts instead reveal how persistent institutions of power actually are. I develop a theory of hegemonic components of national identity that links institutionalized white supremacy to the differential treatment of non-white perpetrators, even when they are deemed terrorists, through a process of institutional reproduction. Drawing on interviews with German national security elites, I show that even when white supremacist violence is treated as terrorism, both legally and discursively, it does not engender policy responses and attitudinal changes on par with those following other terrorist threats.

On June 2, 2019, neo-Nazi Stephan Ernst shot conservative German politician Walter Lübcke in the head. In the aftermath of the assassination, commentators and politicians spoke of an overdue reckoning with white supremacist terrorism in Germany. Many connected Lübcke's murder to a growing "epidemic" of white supremacist violence in the country (Kuras 2019; Speit 2019), from massive far-right rallies in Dresden ("PEGIDA" 2018) and Chemnitz (Serhan 2018) to massive weapons stockpiles and "death lists" in Mecklenburg-Vorpommern (Oltermann 2019a). Others were explicit about the role of more mundane politics: Annegret Kramp-Karrenbauer, then leader of the Christian Democratic Union (CDU), of which Lübcke was a member, said that any CDU member considering forming a coalition government with the far-right Alternative for Germany "should close their eyes and think about Walter Lübcke" (Oltermann 2019b).

Lübcke's assassination is far from the first time that political violence has been framed as a turning point for a government's policies against white supremacist violence. In the United States, politicians called for renewed focus on white supremacist terrorism after the August 2017 killing of peaceful protester Heather Heyer in Charlottesville, Virginia, and again after the August 2019 shooting in El Paso, Texas (Rascoe 2018; Pérez-Peña and Specia 2019). Yet efforts to counter violent white supremacy¹ frequently eschew the damning language of "terrorism"—and are consistently under-resourced and underprioritized compared to those aimed at other violent political ideologies and movements (Beinart 2018; Quinn 2019). Why do acts of white supremacist violence consistently fail to constitute true turning points for policy change?

Rather than considering violent events as critical junctures for institutional change, I argue that such events reveal

how persistent institutions of power actually are. Capoccia and Kelemen (2007) have cautioned that historical events are as likely to reproduce the status quo as they are to upend it, yet a tradition of theories casting institutions as stable and self-reinforcing has biased research toward studying institutional change (see Schmidt 2008; Campbell 2010, for overviews). I counter this trend and suggest that political violence can be a site of institutional stability rather than upheaval. Certainly, violence can lead to new policy priorities: contemporary international relations would look very different had the United States not responded to the September 11, 2001 attacks the way that it did. Focusing on attacks or patterns of attacks as explanatory variables for institutional responses to terrorism, however, obscures much larger sociopolitical institutions that allow these attacks to be interpreted and acted upon (or not) in particular ways. I develop a theory of government responses to white supremacist violence that links components of hegemonic national identity (Brudny and Finkel 2011) to the ways in which certain strands of violence are constructed as threats to society while others are left largely unchecked. In doing so, I flesh out the relatively intuitive insight that "race matters" in counterterrorism policy by providing a framework for understanding *why* and *how* it matters.

To provide evidence for the ways white supremacy is enacted and reconstituted through responses to political violence, I turn to Germany. The German case allows for analysis of reactions to white supremacist violence in a context where historical events might be expected to make strong responses more likely *ex ante*. Based on fieldwork in Berlin, primary and secondary sources, and interviews with German bureaucrats and security professionals, I examine how political elites reckoned with and continue to make sense of the groups and ideologies behind these events, while not reckoning with other groups and ideologies perpetrating and promoting violence around the same time. I find that specific events do matter for understanding responses to terrorism and political violence—precisely because they demonstrate how institutions of hegemonic national identity persist in German society across a variety of historical contexts and threat environments, how those institutions continue to inhibit significant policy responses to white supremacist violence, and how international discourse surrounding terrorism shapes, but does not determine, security policy.

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¹To be clear, "violent white supremacy" is redundant. I use the full phrase to drive the point home.

This interaction between persistent domestic institutions and changing international narratives has implications beyond Germany. Academically, much of what we know about how governments respond to political violence focuses on attacks perpetrated by Islamists (e.g., [Nayak 2006](#); [Dixit 2016](#)), yet the empirical record indicates that responses to attacks by white supremacists look quite different. Moreover, given recent upticks in white supremacist attacks, there is an urgent need to understand how governments in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand respond to violent events perpetrated by members of the white majority rather than those constructed as “Other.”² Unpacking when and why political violence engenders sea changes in national security policy is relevant not only for Germany, but for all countries experiencing violence of varying ideological stripes.

This article makes several other contributions, both scholarly and practical. First, I modify the dominant events-centric approach in terrorism studies ([Schuurman 2018](#)). By examining events as sites of institutional reproduction rather than change, I show that elite and societal attempts to make sense of political violence are in fact processes of fitting new domestic and international developments into familiar institutional structures. Second, I provide a framework for understanding how domestic security institutions interact with and interpret international narratives surrounding terrorism. I demonstrate that international patterns of political violence, and discourses about them, may shape the content of domestic security policies, but they do not dictate the underlying ideological imperatives to center the security of a particular ingroup. Lastly, my evidence underscores that white supremacist institutions are extremely difficult to uproot even when people are aware of and uncomfortable with them. Simply allocating more resources to fight specific threats may not be evidence of more profound attitudinal shifts toward the root causes of violence.

A few definitional clarifications are in order before moving on. By “white supremacy,” I mean not only the dyadic relationships between whites and various racial others, but also the broader system of discursive and practical ties that generate and reproduce racial identities ([Jung 2011](#), 10–11). White supremacy is therefore a system of oppression comprising a variety of institutions, narratives, and practices that naturalize whites as the dominant group in society (and perpetuate the idea that whites are supposed to be at the top of a racial hierarchy). Throughout this paper, I use the “white supremacist” and “far-right” qualifiers interchangeably, following scholars who emphasize the central role of racial domination in far-right movements ([Blee 2002](#); [Blee and Creasap 2010](#)).

How We Understand Government Responses to Terrorism

This article starts from two ontological positions that are worth stating explicitly. First, I follow the critical terrorism studies literature in treating terrorism as an unstable, subjective category, the contents and characteristics of which vary from observer to observer ([Jackson 2007](#); [Stampnitzky 2013](#);

²I follow [Shiells \(2010\)](#) in locating whiteness within a transnational community comprising North Americans, Europeans, and members of British settler states who claim European ancestry. I specify that “North America,” here, means the United States and Canada, while “Europe” means “Western Europe.” Contemporary usages of “whiteness” to explain racism in Eastern Europe may in fact be an attempt to make post-Soviet states legible within Western discourses of ingroup-outgroup identity (see [Law 2018](#)), so I do not presume that my theoretical framework translates to Eastern European contexts.

[Phillips 2019](#)). Accordingly, I do not wish to reify the association of “terrorism” with any specific group, ideology, or cause. However, constructed concepts still have tangible effects on the world, and so I do aim to point out the similarities between groups, ideologies, and causes called “terrorist” and others in the same political space that are not. This differential labeling in spite of similarities thus becomes a site for investigation of what “terrorism” actually means in a particular context, regardless of what government or academic definitions claim on paper.

I assume, further, that “terrorism” is constructed as a unique category of violence, one treated as qualitatively different from other forms of violence ([Huff and Kertzer 2018](#), 56). Violence classified as terrorism may also be murder, for example, but the application of the “terrorism” label signals that this is especially reprehensible and incomprehensible (to the observer) murder that goes against accepted norms of who can do violence to whom and in what manner. “Terrorism” therefore spawns what [Agamben \(2005\)](#) calls a state of exception, one in which exceptional (extra)legal actions in response are not only made normatively permissible but also understood as unquestionably necessary ([Ní Aoláin and Campbell 2018](#)). The issue of terrorism is perceived as so dire and threatening that it demands the suspension of the usual order of things *for the purposes of preserving that order*—and by doing so, I argue, reveals that order’s fundamental character.

This article is therefore concerned with the choice to not treat white supremacist violence as terrorism—whether according to legal definitions or based upon common practices of how violence deemed “terrorist” should be addressed—and why that might be the case. As the German case will show, even calling white supremacist violence “terrorist,” both as a legal classification and as a common description in public and official discourse, does not mean that subsequent counterterrorism policy will resemble policy formulated in response to other “terrorist” threats.

As it stands, there is little academic work on government responses to contemporary white supremacist violence, as well as on white supremacist terrorism in general ([Blee 2005](#); [Simi 2010](#)).³ Certainly scholars of the far right have written extensively on white supremacist ideologies in far-right political parties ([Mudde 2016](#)), social movements ([Blee and Creasap 2010](#)), youth cultures ([Miller-Idriss 2018](#)), and online communities ([Simi and Futrell 2006](#); [Daniels 2009](#); [Caren, Jowers, and Gaby 2012](#)). Far-right violence has also received extensive treatment ([Koopmans and Olzak 2004](#); [Adamczyk et al. 2014](#); [Benček and Strasheim 2014](#); [Klein and Muis 2019](#)). Still, these ideological movements and their accompanying violence are rarely described in scholarly work as *terrorism*.⁴ This semantic choice matters: it minimizes conversations between work on white supremacist violence and on other types of extremist violence more frequently called “terrorism,” stifling opportunities to see whether theories and findings travel across ideological persuasions. Siloing studies of far-right and white supremacist extremism also furthers the idea that white supremacist violence should perhaps not be called terrorism; while a normative consideration, it is not clear that there is any objective reason, in terms of goals or tactics,

³In making this judgment, I and others assess specific mentions of “terrorism” in scholarly work, however researchers define the term. It may be the case that some scholars study what other scholars call “terrorism” but use different language.

⁴For exceptions, see [Bjorgo \(1995\)](#), [Köhler \(2016\)](#), and [Bjorgo and Ravndal \(2019\)](#).

not to place white supremacist violence under the terrorist umbrella.

Pinning the comparative lack of work on white supremacist violence on the newness of the phenomenon is also factually incorrect. Many countries have indeed experienced a recent surge in far-right activism, which in turn has spawned numerous new violent political actors. Yet these actors did not appear out of the ether, but rather have roots in older sources of violence. Rich historical accounts of far-right activity in the United States (Belew 2018), Germany (Rabert 1995; Köhler 2016), and throughout Europe (Bjorgo 1995) emphasize that far-right violence, rather than being a series of isolated incidents by “lone wolves,” is frequently part of a larger organized movement that looks to and lauds predecessor organizations in crafting goals and messaging. The past therefore provides an important but underutilized source of information that not only could shed light on contemporary dynamics of white supremacist violence but is also *directly connected* to that violence.

Nor are contemporary patterns of government (non)responses to white supremacist violence particularly new. Studies of violence by the Ku Klux Klan and analogous groups in the United States stress the permissive environments in which these groups were allowed, if not encouraged, to flourish (Newton 2009; Belew 2018). Officials in Germany in the 1980s similarly expressed reluctance to pursue neo-Nazi violence with the same vigor directed at left-wing violence a decade prior (Mcgowan 2006). Governments today may have begun pursuing new programs in response to white supremacist violence, but these are historically the exception rather than the rule; further, there is considerable doubt about the degree to which these programs constitute window dressing as opposed to sea changes in national security policy.⁵ Thus, the problem remains: governments continue to respond half-heartedly to white supremacist violence, and scholars continue to lack theoretical frameworks for understanding the persistence of this pattern.

Incorporating Hegemonic National Identity

The missing link is also perhaps the most obvious: race. The role of race and identity in affecting responses to political violence will feel familiar to scholars of the Global War on Terror, who have observed the role of “us versus them” dichotomies in foreign policy discourse following the September 11, 2001 attacks (Fattah and Fierke 2009; Holland 2013). This tendency to focus on international discourses and policies is paralleled in the recent work on international far-right extremism. The transnational linkages between white supremacist movements are robust (Köhler 2014; Veilleux-Lepage and Archambault 2019) and build on discourses and practices of international counterterrorism following 9/11: Froio and Ganesh (2019, 19) note that Islamophobia is “the international glue of the far right.” Yet this focus on international factors, while important, risks identifying the sources of white supremacist violence too narrowly. White

supremacy may be an international institution (Mills 1994), but it is also profoundly rooted in national cultures.

I argue that understanding variation in national responses to white supremacist violence requires viewing international patterns of terrorism and counterterrorism as shaping, but neither determining nor constraining, domestic national security policy. International pressures can affect national incentives—and indeed, one of the most significant predictors of whether a state passed domestic counterterrorism legislation in the twenty-first century is whether it participated in War on Terror efforts in Afghanistan or Iraq (Pokalova 2015). Yet it is *domestic* institutions of white supremacy that allow such pressures to have effects on domestic policy so quickly.

International systems perpetuating white supremacy interact with domestic institutions to encourage the latter’s persistence by situating the problem of white supremacy in a space largely external to the domestic state. Characterized domestically as a “set of erratic beliefs” or a “disease afflicting certain individuals,” white supremacy’s deep entrenchment remains obscured (Bonilla-Silva and Baiocchi 2001, 118). Because of the long-standing construction of whites as the dominant group in society, whites are able to take white dominance for granted (Jardina 2019, 6). Whiteness becomes what Frankenberg (1993, 203–4) calls an “unmarked marker,” such that the situation of whites at the top of a group hierarchy becomes so natural as to be almost unremarkable (Morrison 1992, 2016). Even if demographics change, or white dominance is contested on a widespread scale, white supremacy does not disappear: instead, it confidently reasserts itself, as occurred in the United States after the Civil Rights Movement with mass incarceration of Black people (Alexander 2010)—because it has become so fundamental that the only option is to reinvent it.

In the language of institutional scholarship, white supremacy is a sticky “rule of the game” (North 1990). Though the precise enactment of that rule may change over time, the institution of white supremacy retains its foundational character of advantaging some identities over others and presenting that ordering as normal. Other scholars have noted that its perpetuation requires both casting it as neutral (Evans and Moore 2015, 440) and pathologizing those who question whether that neutrality is, in fact, real (Davis and Ernst 2019). As a result, it becomes difficult for non-white supremacist understandings of society, and of the configuration of groups within it, to be thinkable (Said 1988).

To illustrate this point, I draw on the concept of hegemonic national identity, developed by Brudny and Finkel (2011) to explain variation in post-communist democratization in Russia and Ukraine. For Brudny and Finkel (2011, 815), national identity is a form of collective identity encompassing attitudes, beliefs, and commitments about the boundaries of a nation, who qualifies for membership, and how the sociopolitical and cultural structures in that nation should look and operate. National identities are neither singular nor static and thus experience contestation, or varying degrees of agreement about the content of that identity—what it means politically, socially, and culturally to be German, for example (Abdelal et al. 2009, 696).

Brudny and Finkel argue that, in situations of extremely low contestation, the content of a national identity becomes hegemonic and, in some cases, so deeply entrenched as to be perceived as “the natural order of things for the overwhelming majority of the population” (Lustick 1993, 44).⁶

⁵For example, the Joint Center for Countering Extremism and Terrorism in Germany oversees efforts to combat right-wing terrorism but was only formed in 2012 and is also expected to monitor left-wing and “foreign” terrorism. By comparison, the Joint Counterterrorism Center has existed since 2004 and has only one portfolio item: Islamist terrorism. The Office of Community Partnerships at the US Department of Homeland Security, meanwhile, administered grants to organizations working to counter violent extremism of all stripes but had its budget slashed by 75 percent under the Trump Administration; grants to organizations working specifically with white supremacists were rescinded.

⁶The concept is similar to philosopher Antonio Gramsci’s concept of cultural hegemony; see Lears (1995) for a thorough treatment.

I contend, further, that certain components of national identity are more hegemonic than others—that is, they are so embedded in the construct of national identity, and so indispensable to its continuation, that not only are they usually uncontested, but they are typically not even thought of as contestable in the first place. These components may not be openly recognized as constitutive of a national identity, even as they underpin it. They can also persist through enormous changes in domestic and international politics. Even if circumstances change, the underlying principles that govern power relationships may not. Paradoxically, then, major shocks to a polity or political system can demonstrate which power structures are truly entrenched, and thus hegemonic.

I argue that violent events in white-majority countries constitute such shocks, and that subsequent discursive and policy responses underscore the hegemonic nature of white supremacy as a component of identity in Western Europe, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand. Because the persistence of hegemonic components of national identity requires neither acknowledging nor questioning them, violence that forces such questioning—that proposes an alternative social ordering, or that does or is perceived to challenge white supremacy—constitutes a threat. Whether or not that threat represents a realistic challenge to the power of whites as an identity group or a symbolic challenge to group esteem (Huddy 2003, 540; see also Blumer 1958), it nonetheless probes a fundamental ordering principle of society and makes the constructed nature of white supremacy visible. Ingroup–outgroup hostilities arising from a “minimal-group situation,” in which even the smallest differences between groups can lead to strong group identities and feelings of animosity toward outsiders, are well documented (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Diehl 1990; Huddy 2004). However, whiteness and Otherness are far from minimal groups: they lie at the heart of sociopolitical structures throughout the “West.” Calling attention to those structures and questioning whites’ dominant position, as counter-hegemonic violence is wont to do, is far from a mundane threat. In fact, it demands classification with the most abhorrent category of violence political elites have at their disposal: terrorism.

As a result, violence perpetrated by individuals belonging to identity groups viewed as incongruous with white supremacy, or acting on behalf of ideologies that challenge white supremacy’s hegemonic status, becomes classified as “terrorism” and treated accordingly. In saying this, I do not suggest that all variation in government responses can be attributed to a single rationale, conscious or otherwise, by state actors of perpetuating white supremacy. Rather, the repeated employment of particular kinds of discourses and strategies in the aftermath of political violence has the effect—conscious or otherwise—of reinforcing practices of racialization (Rana 2011, 213).⁷ Anecdotally, we observe this with the rush by the US FBI’s counterterrorism division to name “black identity extremists” (Winter and Weinberger 2017) a domestic terrorist threat, while no Ku Klux Klan member was indicted on terrorism charges until 2016.⁸

Meanwhile, violence perpetrated by individuals acting on behalf of white supremacist ideologies is less likely to be

called “terrorist”—and, if it is extreme enough to receive the “terrorist” designation, it will still not receive the same treatment as other types of terrorism. This is important for both discursive and political reasons. Discursively, the construction of “terrorism” as incomprehensible and alien to accepted norms of political resistance means that much is at stake in even informal designations: framing an issue as “terrorist” “automatically authorizes states to use forms of violence that they would otherwise be penalized for” (Dixit 2016, 33). Politically, calling white supremacist violence “terrorist,” given the connotations of that term, would require questioning a hegemonic component of national identity that, given its status as hegemonic, is explicitly designed not to be questioned. It would also require identifying the institutionalized structures that preserve white supremacy and, for some, the uncomfortable mundaneness of those structures in everyday life. Anecdotally, we observe this discomfort in discussions about policing white supremacist content online, with an employee at Twitter expressly stating that taking a more aggressive approach to white supremacist content on the platform would likely impact the accounts of some Republican politicians (Cox and Koebler 2019).

To trace this dual tendency—calling violence by non-white perpetrators “terrorism” while not doing the same for white supremacist violence—in more comprehensive detail, and to demonstrate the utility of the hegemonic national identity frame in shedding light on why white supremacist violence is rarely followed by policy or normative changes, I turn to the case of Germany.

Methods: Elite Perspectives from Germany

One might consider Germany a unique case when it comes to contemporary treatment of white supremacist violence. Because of the Nazi era and the continued use of the Holocaust as a prototypical example of genocide, one might predict little tolerance for and swift condemnation of any political behavior, much less violence, motivated by white supremacist ideas. German reckonings with the past are sometimes performative and far from perfect; nevertheless, Germany seems a case that could cast doubt on the assumption that instances of white supremacist violence do not produce policy change.

This was not, however, what I found. That discursive and policy responses to white supremacist violence have not been widespread in Germany suggests that historical events, though they shape understandings of contemporary political violence, do not determine those understandings. The mechanisms that can shed light on the treatment of white supremacist violence by governments—hegemonic components of national identity, in my framework—travel beyond the German case. What an analysis of Germany does is highlight those components’ persistence and power, even if the exact work that they do in affecting government responses to political violence will look somewhat different in other contexts.

I base my analysis on a series of semi-structured elite interviews with German bureaucrats and national security professionals conducted in Berlin during the summer of 2019. I worked initially through professional contacts and cold emailing, and then used snowball sampling to arrange the rest of my interviews. My interlocutors come from an array of professional backgrounds and party affiliations. Most were based in Berlin, though some worked primarily in other parts of the country and came to the capital on business. Notably, all were white, which is consistent with the lack of ethnic and racial diversity in the federal government: in 2016,

⁷ See, for example, the long-standing identification of US Muslims with barbarism and anti-Western values, which made the continued othering of Muslims after 9/11 appear reasonable within larger scripts of Muslims as violent (Caínkar and Selod 2018).

⁸ The crime fell under the “weapons of mass destruction” heading: the perpetrator had planned to build a dirty bomb using an X-ray machine and set it off at a mosque in upstate New York. See Ellingsen (2017). Other KKK members have been imprisoned on charges of witness tampering and other lesser offenses.

the Federal Institute for Population Research found that only 14.8 percent of federal and 6.7 percent of local government employees had a migrant background (*Migrationshintergrund*, a term meaning that either they or one of their parents were not native-born German citizens) (Knight 2016).⁹ I supplement my interviews with government and media reports, secondary sources, and quotidian on-the-ground interactions and experiences in Berlin.

Firsthand information from national security elites is a rare commodity in social science research, and the German case is no exception. In part, this is due to the bureaucracy of access: one of my interlocutors inadvertently included a long email chain in their reply to me, in which they had gone through three levels of approval for our interview. It is also a product of the German counterterrorism community, which several people described to me as self-contained. I found that my interlocutors were frequently surprised, albeit pleasantly so, that a US researcher was interested in their opinions. That my research struck them as novel afforded me an advantage in that they were more willing to speak with me; they had not yet been “overstudied.” Nor, as bureaucrats or staffers, were many of them used to their opinions being the center of attention. By showing interest in my interlocutors’ experiences, I was able to establish rapport and encourage them to speak freely.

Researcher positionality is of particular concern in elite interviews due to power differentials and the issue of self-presentation: elites are powerful, privileged experts in their areas, which may place the researcher at a disadvantage in terms of status (Mikecz 2012). Navigating my status as a US, German-speaking researcher presented a challenge. On the one hand, my language skills afforded me access to several elites who, by self-admission, could not have conversed comfortably in English. I also shared a perceived racial identity with all of my interlocutors, which may have led them to speak more openly about issues that they would not have discussed candidly with someone from a different background.¹⁰ On the other hand, I was an unknown quantity in terms of my “expert” status. I would occasionally mention my professional background in the US terrorism and counterterrorism community, which may have led me to be perceived as an equal in some circumstances—though in others, it derailed the interview because my interlocutor became more interested in asking for my opinions on terrorism in the United States than in answering my questions.

My overall approach to the interviews was to ask broad, open-ended questions (e.g., “what are the major conversations happening in the German national security community right now”) and allow my interlocutors to answer freely and for as long as they liked with minimal interruption. Many admitted they had not thought about some of my questions before, giving me confidence in their unfiltered answers. I used strategies from ordinary language interviewing (Schaffer 2006) to gain insight into how my interlocutors understood terms such as “terrorism” and “extremism,” which, I found, are used differently in Germany than in the United States. I noted when language seemed inconsistent to me as a non-German (“earlier you said X, but now you seem to be saying Y; can you explain?”), and I asked directly about personal usage (“I’d like to understand how you use X; can you elaborate?”). In this way, I sought to elicit nat-

ural usage of these concepts and then invite interlocutors to examine that usage in the context of describing political violence perpetrated by a range of actors.

Event Selection

I selected historical episodes of political violence for further analysis via an inductive approach, noting which cases were frequently mentioned as significant by my interlocutors for understanding German approaches to terrorism and counterterrorism. I focus on three periods of violence: the height of activity by the extremist left-wing Red Army Faction (RAF) from 1970 to 1977; low-level nationalist and racist violence in the aftermath of the 1990 German reunification; and the series of attacks committed by the neo-Nazi National Socialist Underground (NSU) between 2000 and 2007. These periods are important precisely because they are not unique events, but rather sustained episodes that could have sparked, and in some cases did spark, significant policy responses. Moreover, as sustained episodes of low-level violence, these episodes may be cases of more typical responses to violence, rather than extreme responses to “black swan” events such as the 9/11 attacks (LaFree, Dugan, and Miller 2015).

Each episode also underscores, in different ways, how the narrative surrounding white supremacist violence in Germany retains common features across historical contexts and threat environments. The RAF case remains the prototypical example of German terrorism for many elites—even though significant neo-Nazi and far-right violence occurred during the same period. The post-reunification case shows that this comparative marginalization of white supremacist violence, both in real time and in historical memory, occurs even when the threat environment is less saturated: when the German government had little other domestic political violence to worry about, it still downplayed the significance of nationalist attacks. Finally, the NSU case, as one of the most significant recent episodes of white supremacist violence in Germany, demonstrates how a most likely case for policy change nevertheless is not understood by national security elites to have produced that change.

One might reasonably question the degree to which my inductive approach allowed my elite interlocutors to “control” the narrative and further their preferred interpretations of the past.

I find this concern unmerited for two reasons. First, individuals of various ages from diverse bureaucracies, political affiliations, and areas of expertise consistently brought up the same historical episodes, indicating that these episodes resonate for a broad audience as important for making sense of the German case. Furthermore, not all of my interlocutors interpreted these episodes in the same way nor assigned them equal significance, casting doubt on the idea of one preferred state-level narrative (or at least that my interlocutors were out to further that narrative in our conversations).

Second, my interlocutors mentioned other episodes that I do not analyze here, indicating, as one might expect, that the full tapestry of German terrorism and counterterrorism is much richer than can be addressed in one article. I do not include any event that came up only once in my interviews (e.g., the surge of nationalism during the 2006 FIFA World Cup, which was hosted by Germany), nor events that are easier places to observe ingroup–outgroup dynamics (e.g., the 2016 attack on a Berlin Christmas market by an Islamic State supporter). Other episodes, such as the entire duration of

⁹In comparison to about 25 percent in the general population. The *Migrationshintergrund* category includes individuals who are white but not German and so is an imperfect proxy for racial diversity.

¹⁰For example, one of my interlocutors spoke candidly about refugee flows as a serious problem for counterterrorism in Germany. It is unclear whether they would have shared the same viewpoint with a non-white interviewer.

the East German police state, are important but beyond the scope of a single article.

Analysis

The RAF Era

In the 1970s, a West German leftist organization calling itself the Red Army Faction (*Rote Armee Fraktion*) perpetrated a series of bombings, kidnappings, and murders of prominent Germans that stunned the West German security services, and the government responded swiftly with law enforcement crackdowns and new legislation designed to counter future waves of terrorism. Interestingly, however, West Germany also experienced a parallel wave of political violence from the far right in the 1970s that engendered no similar response.

This relative ignorance is important for two reasons. First, the attention received by the RAF continues to affect how German elites conceptualize terrorism, both directly through legal mechanisms and indirectly by institutionalizing a mutually agreed-upon template for what terrorism looks like, with clear implications for policy. Second, the centrality of the RAF—and not of far-right violence—provides an initial example of significant white supremacist violence not being taken as seriously as a contemporaneous threat backed by an ideology unaligned with hegemonic power structures.

Between the organization's formation in 1970 and the dissolution of its second generation by 1978, the RAF committed numerous bombings, robberies, kidnappings, and murders of German political and business leaders. Following four bombings in 1972 that killed five people (including four US soldiers) and injured over fifty, German authorities caught and arrested five key members of the RAF, including the organization's three founders. Despite this highly successful police operation, the RAF reconstituted and, in 1977, engaged in a series of murders and kidnappings, including that of industrialist and former SS officer Hanns Martin Schleyer, who was eventually killed. The West German government was so taken aback that the RAF's new leadership were almost all arrested within a year (Aust 2009).

At the same time that the RAF took off in the early 1970s, West Germany experienced a renewed wave of violence associated with the far right. According to the Federal Ministry of the Interior, 103 right-wing crimes with "terrorist motives" took place in 1970 alone (BfV 1971). Federal statistics show that 1971 remains the deadliest year for right-wing homicides on record (Köhler 2016, 101).¹¹ Between 1970 and 1972, Action Resistance (*Aktion Widerstand*), an organization initially formed as the street activism wing of the National Democratic Party (*Nationaldemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, NPD),¹² mobilized around 3,000 militants and perpetrated dozens of arsons and assaults (Köhler 2016, 76–77). Numerous other extremist organizations grew out of the remnants of the Nazi Party, continuing a pattern of white supremacist violence dating to the creation of West Germany in 1949 (Pfahl-Traugbber 1999; McGowan 2006).

Such widespread far-right and neo-Nazi violence, while not as high-profile as the flashier RAF attacks, nevertheless

killed more people in one year than the RAF did in its entire twenty-eight-year existence.¹³ Still, it is the RAF, not the far right, that remains the focal point for ideas about terrorism in Germany. "There is always the RAF comparison in the security agencies, the media, and among the public," one interlocutor told me, "which is strange because there was also right-wing terrorism in the '60s and '70s." Several other national security elites echoed this sentiment. In general, elites acknowledge that right-wing terrorism—and here they do use the term "terrorism" consistently—is a long-standing feature of German politics, despite the fact that, as one person put it, "Before 9/11, 'terrorism' always meant 'left-wing' because of the RAF."

Why was it the RAF, and not the neo-Nazi organizations, that formed the basis for prosecuting terrorism in German criminal law? Section 129a of the German criminal code (*Strafgesetzbuch*) was developed in 1976 specifically to counter terrorism in the mold of the RAF (Zöller 2009). Because the RAF was a relatively hierarchical organization, Section 129a provides sentencing guidelines for organizations made up of at least three people, not single perpetrators or duos (author interview). Because the RAF engaged in extensive plotting before carrying out attacks, Section 129a focuses on *Vorbereitungshandlungen* (preparatory acts) to allow law enforcement to conduct investigations and pursue terrorist charges before an attack actually occurs (Zöller 2009).¹⁴ Neither of these features—hierarchical organization or extensive planning—were characteristic of the neo-Nazi organizations of the era. The genealogy of the law is clear and was unanimously agreed upon by my interlocutors, even if some disagreed on how the law was actually applied in practice.

The singular focus on the RAF during the 1970s could be explained by the fact that the violent far right was a disparate collective of many organizations,¹⁵ most of whom were short-lived in part because law enforcement was committed to chipping away at the threat. Accordingly, one could argue that the right-wing violence of the era is less significant in Germans' memories because it seemed easier to combat. Still, the fact that terrorism statutes in the *Strafgesetzbuch* were written with the RAF in mind reflects an importance assigned to that group: at a time when it was facing multiple threats from violent non-state actors, the German state chose to design its laws to address one in particular.

Likewise, the focus on the RAF could mirror international trends in counterterrorism policy. Left-wing violence was much more common in the 1970s than it is today, so Germany may simply have responded to international pressures to put the leftist threat at the top of its domestic security agenda. I contend that international factors did play a role in Germany's national security policy, but in an unexpected way. Namely, the positioning of leftist violence as the primary "terrorist" threat in Germany occurred, as it did throughout the "First World" of the Cold War era, despite the concurrent presence of rampant white supremacist violence. In Italy, neo-fascist organizations killed over 100 and injured over 500 in a series of bombings during the so-called Years of Lead, yet it is the leftist Red Brigades that

¹¹ Incidentally, 1971 is also the first year for which data are available. "Right-wing homicide" is a broad category, and its definition changed slightly after 2001 with the introduction of a new classification scheme for politically motivated crimes. These statistics are also contested as undercounts by journalists and civil society actors. Regardless, it is notable that the number of right-wing homicides in 1971 is still almost twice as high as for the next highest year (twenty-three, in 1994); the definition of right-wing homicide did not change during this period.

¹² The NPD was one of three successor parties to the Nazi Party.

¹³ The RAF is typically considered responsible for around thirty deaths. The Global Terrorism Database reports that the RAF and its affiliate, the 2nd of June Movement, killed seventeen people.

¹⁴ It is important to note that this is an interpretation of Section 129a; the text of the law is vague. Members of law enforcement agencies offered different interpretations with respect to how they use the law in their jobs. Here, I am interested in the (perceived) intent of the law, not its enforcement, as a means of framing discourse.

¹⁵ Manthe (2018) identifies at least twenty-two.

near-exclusively stand in for Italian “terrorism” in English-language sources (Weinberg and Eubank 1988). In the United States, narratives of Cold War-era domestic political violence peter out after the end of the Vietnam War—at the exact time that violence shifted from left-wing protest to the organization and consolidation of the white power movement (Belew 2018). And in France, widespread racist attacks against Algerian immigrants in the 1970s have been positioned almost entirely outside the discourse of “terrorism” (see Meynier and Meynier 2011, for a descriptive account). The dominance of leftist violence in narratives of terrorism during this period is a construction, a choice—one made in Germany and elsewhere, speaking to the wider prevalence of white supremacist power structures.

This choice continues to have consequences today. One of my interlocutors pointed out that Anders Behring Breivik, the self-identified Nazi who killed seventy-seven people in Norway in 2011, could not have been charged with terrorism under German law because he was not part of an organization comprising at least three people. The violent far right, although its members were arrested and prosecuted, had no analogous lasting effect. Instead, white supremacist violence was treated as a criminal threat and addressed through traditional criminal means, while the RAF was welded into German memory as the prototypical example of terrorist violence. Hence, even though my interlocutors understood the white supremacist violence of the 1970s to be terrorism, the narration of this violence as *not* terrorism, or at least not as significant as RAF terrorism, has had lasting effects on German counterterrorism law.

What happens when there is no left-wing analogue to white supremacist terrorism—that is, when white supremacist violence does not occur contemporaneously with comparable levels of violence from other sources? To answer this question, I move forward in time to the 1990s, following German reunification.

The Post-Reunification Era

Although widely heralded as a triumph for the neoliberal world order, German reunification at the end of the Cold War came with a host of problems. A full analysis of the challenges of reunification is beyond the scope of this article; here I wish to focus on the wave of nationalism after reunification and the violence that followed.

Unlike in the 1970s, white supremacist violence in the 1990s was not accompanied by widespread violence on behalf of another cause. Thus, the case of post-reunification violence allows for analysis of the German interpretation of and response to political violence in a relatively homogeneous threat environment.¹⁶ For some German national security elites, post-reunification violence—and the lack of a strong state response to it—set the stage for right-wing extremism in Germany today. For others, it barely registers.

Reunification provided an opportunity for German nationalism to rear its head, often in ugly ways. For immigrant communities, the early 1990s were a time of fear at heights not experienced since 1945 (Köhler 2016, 85). Official statistics for the period vary: according to the Federal Criminal Police (*Bundeskriminalamt*), there were 4,587 incidents of xenophobic violence in 1992, while the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für*

Verfassungsschutz, BfV) recorded 2,285 “right-extremist acts of violence” over the same period (Atkinson 1993). Perhaps the most infamous instance of violence of the era took place over three days in August 1992 and involved hundreds of militant right-wing extremists attacking an apartment complex for asylum seekers in the Lichtenhagen district of Rostock, a northeastern German city.¹⁷ Almost 3,000 bystanders applauded while the police and militants clashed—but the clapping, as one bystander admitted, was “against the police” and in support of the militants (Jüttner 2007). Similar incidents of sustained anti-immigrant violence occurred around the same time in Hoyerswerda, Solingen, and Mölln.

Such violence, some of my interlocutors stressed, was abnormal and completely out of line with the broader culture of intolerance for nationalism in Germany. Because of the Nazi era, acts that would be considered patriotism in some other contexts, such as displaying the German flag, are to this day sometimes considered unacceptably nationalistic in Germany.¹⁸ My interlocutors said this was even truer in the 1990s. Other interlocutors took the opposite viewpoint, stating that the government did not treat white supremacist violence as a serious threat and drawing parallels to responses to far-right violence today:

... unfortunately, for the big parties [the Christian Democratic Union and the Social Democrats], there is no line in the sand with racism. This is similar to what happened in the '90s with increased nationalism and racist attacks and demonstrations. People reacted with understanding, and the effect was a strengthening of the far right that radicalized into terrorism.

Making sense of this disagreement requires differentiating between official narratives of major events and larger institutionalized power structures that make such events possible in the first place. Certainly, the German government expressed shock and outrage at the riots in Rostock-Lichtenhagen and elsewhere, with officials calling such attacks “horrific and shameful” and “totally unacceptable” (Kinzer 1991). These attacks ran counter to the perceived need for “normalcy”—both a desire felt domestically and a demand from international sources pushing for European unity (McAdams 1997; Lang, Mushaben, and Wendler 2017). Whether “normalcy” should involve further atoning for the sins of Nazism or moving past them was contested; regardless, racist riots were incompatible with a rejuvenated and Westernized East Germany and had to be written off as aberrations in order for the narrative of normalcy to make sense. It is therefore unsurprising that some elites, including some who lived through this period, express shock at the idea that intolerant attitudes, to say nothing of acting upon those attitudes, were not widely *verboten*.

Yet as Miller-Idriss and Rothenberg (2012) highlight in their study of citizen conceptualizations of the German nation, the positions of elites—which are often expected to be clear and consistent in public discourse—do not trickle down directly to the population. While in Germany, I heard many stories from young people who had grown up in small towns far away from the liberal Berlin bubble in the 1990s who regularly heard racist and antisemitic slurs on the playground. Public opinion polls from 1991 show that about 21 percent of Germans in the former East and 38 percent in

¹⁶ Other actors perpetrated violence in the 1990s, including Kurdish dissidents and the aforementioned RAF before its voluntary dissolution in 1998. None of these actors, however, approached the level of activity of white supremacist and anti-immigrant groups, so it is impossible to rule out a lack of attention thereto on the grounds of objectively lower threat levels.

¹⁷ It is unknown how many asylum seekers, attackers, and bystanders were injured in the riots, as the official inquiry into the incident only lists 204 police injuries (Brandt 1993, 86).

¹⁸ A member of the German parliament (*Bundestag*) who announced in 2001 that he was proud to be German was called a “skinhead” and “racist hooligan” by other legislators. See Cohen (2001).

the former West expressed sympathy for “radical rightist tendencies” (Kinzer 1991). Neither 21 percent nor 38 percent is a majority, and not all racist rhetoric or beliefs lead to violence. I do not mean to suggest that most Germans tolerated white supremacy in the 1990s; the historical record does not support this. Still, these stories and statistics indicate that what was broadly “unacceptable” in the 1990s was violence. The ideology underpinning it, while also abhorrent to most Germans, did not seem to merit strong responses from the state beyond words of condemnation.

It is possible, of course, that the security agencies would have liked to respond more strongly to white supremacist violence in the 1990s but were unable to do so. In the former East, the police were severely under-resourced following reunification, and security forces were not used to combating street violence. There was also concern about using excessive force in a style reminiscent of the Communist era (Eisenhammer 1992). Still, the applause from bystanders in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, as well as initial insistence from Interior Minister Lothar Kupfer that the riots had not been dangerous or threatened the lives of asylum seekers despite all evidence to the contrary (“Damit” 1992), indicates that far-right ideologies were not entirely absent from the story either. As one of my interlocutors put it, “The problem isn’t the violence. The problem is the ideology.”

That the violence of the 1990s is remembered primarily by security elites as a manifestation of racist ideology and not as terrorism has had two effects. For some, post-reunification violence served as a precursor to white supremacist terrorism today: as we will see in the case of the NSU, some of the most prominent far-right groups of the twenty-first century got their start in neo-Nazi milieus during the 1990s. For others, the anti-immigrant violence of the period feels out of place in a discussion of terrorism in Germany. Despite not facing competition for press coverage or memory space from other types of violence, and despite its similarities to neo-Nazi violence of the Cold War period that was called terrorism, post-reunification white supremacist violence remains an ancillary part of the narrative of German terrorism, if it is perceived to belong in that narrative at all. As a result, the German narrative of white supremacist violence may fail to connect the violence in the 1990s—again, a period in which the German state likely could have taken stronger measures to clamp down on far-right actors had it wished to do so—to more recent patterns of terrorism, creating an incomplete understanding of the roots of this violence. I turn to one such case of recent violence now.

The Post-NSU Era

Given the consistency with which Germany experienced white supremacist violence in the twentieth century, perhaps the uncovering of the neo-Nazi NSU in November 2011 should not have been as stunning as it was. Yet the organization, which murdered ten immigrants and one police officer and executed two bombings over seven years, was widely viewed as unpredictable and unprecedented, including at the highest levels of government (Merkel 2012).

Eight years later, however, the overwhelming consensus among German national security elites is that the NSU failed to constitute a turning point in the German approach to far-right violence. Although institutional competencies and procedures have changed, my interlocutors agreed that discourse about and attitudes toward white supremacist terrorism have not, although not always to the same extent or for the same reasons. How they made sense of this develop-

ment reveals and re-emphasizes the lasting power of white supremacy as an institutionalized power structure in the face of a major violent episode.

Having worked together in neo-Nazi organizations in the state of Thuringia since the mid-1990s, Uwe Böhnhardt, Uwe Mundlos, and Beate Zschäpe, with the help of 100–150 associates, would go on to murder ten Greek and Turkish individuals and a police officer between 2000 and 2007, as well as set off two bombs targeting Iranian and Turkish migrants, injuring twenty-three in total. The attacks took place across Germany, from Munich in the south to Dortmund in the west to Rostock in the north. Following a series of botched bank robberies in November 2011, Böhnhardt and Mundlos committed suicide rather than submitting to the authorities. Zschäpe turned herself in four days later (Köhler 2016).

I was living in Berlin at the time, and the discovery that these crimes, which had been investigated as separate incidents and remained unsolved, were in fact connected and the work of white supremacists created an uproar in the press and shock among ordinary Germans. Chancellor Angela Merkel declared the case a “disgrace” for Germany; Interior Minister Hans-Peter Friedrich said that Germany was facing “a new form of right-wing extremist terrorism” (Grimmer 2011). It is difficult to convey how little the NSU fit into accepted narratives of terrorism and political violence in Germany. As mentioned previously, the RAF remained the prototypical example of terrorism for some Germans. For others, it had been replaced by some nebulous Islamist threat: “We say ‘terrorist’ with IS [the Islamic State] in the back of our minds,” one elite told me in 2019, as an example of how little had changed. “The conversation about, and understanding of the meaning of, terrorism has been Islamist since 2001,” another explained. “Everyone has Islam in their heads,” said another.

This is perhaps unsurprising, given that it parallels contemporary international discourses that have equivocated “terrorism” with “Islam,” so one could say that Germany was simply following in the international community’s footsteps post-9/11. Yet it was the long-standing practice in Germany of deflecting attention away from white supremacist violence that made this equivocation possible in the first place. The result was a replacement of left-wing violence as the primary threat with Islamist violence—a striking move in a country whose interior ministry catalogued over 12,000 instances of right-wing extremist violence in 2004 alone (BfV 2004). Thus, international pressure following 9/11 may have changed the content of the German narrative surrounding terrorism, but it did not change its structure.

As the NSU murders were narrated in the press and official discourse, much of the blame fell on the security agencies for not connecting the dots between the incidents. Suspecting that security agencies might disagree with this narrative, I took care to discuss the NSU with individuals who work in law enforcement, who emphasized structural constraints on even the most competent police operations. Due to the federalized nature of German law enforcement, local police are often not aware of cases in neighboring states that may be connected to their own. Cooperation is further complicated by the *Trennungsgebot* (separation rule), a constitutional provision that prohibits some kinds of information sharing between the police and intelligence agencies.¹⁹ The Federal Office for the Protection

¹⁹The *Trennungsgebot* is a reaction to the politicization of law enforcement under the Nazi regime and the fear that such politicization could occur again. One interlocutor explained the rule’s effects to me thusly: “... the police will come

of the Constitution (roughly equivalent to the British MI5) in particular faced heavy criticism from the political left, and reforms included granting it more power to coordinate cases like the NSU case at the federal level.

Despite these and other reforms, however, security elites repeatedly said that nothing had really changed with respect to combating far-right extremism and terrorism, despite the widespread agreement that the NSU's actions were in fact terrorism. One interlocutor, after providing an exhaustive list of reforms including new police powers, federal bodies, and legislation, nevertheless insisted that these reforms were not systematic. "The state police get more resources, and the *Verfassungsschutz* gets more analysts," they said. "There is a short period of attention [after incidents], but the impact is mostly just more personnel." At the same time, when asked how one would know that the government or a security agency were actually taking white supremacist violence seriously, the most common answer among my interlocutors was "more personnel."²⁰

What explains this simultaneous desire for the very policy the government is pursuing and the persistent belief that the government, despite pursuing that policy, does not take the threat seriously? One might interpret this as elites desiring even more security personnel addressing white supremacist violence, yet digging deeper uncovered that elites believed a discursive and attitudinal change regarding white supremacist violence also needed to occur.

Such change is extremely difficult to engineer. "Discourse tends to snap back," one interlocutor explained. Another described a predictable six-week period of talk following a major attack before things "return to normal." Even those interlocutors who appeared most committed to prioritizing white supremacist violence as a threat still had reservations about being too quick to respond—a position also expressed by critics of their parties or agencies. One interlocutor insisted that nothing would change in Germany until the private sector became involved in counterterrorism because it did not face the same long-standing constraints and biases present in government institutions.

This tension reveals the complexity of situating the NSU, a clear case of white supremacist violence, within an institutional structure that demands not acknowledging the role of white supremacy in its own perpetuation. In narrating the NSU attacks and determining the government response, elites chose to position the NSU as being in German society, but not *of* it—that is, the NSU was a product of something fundamentally opposed to notions of German-ness, because no "true" German would have engaged in such acts of violence (Graef 2020, 13). Thinking otherwise would have required acknowledging that the ideology motivating the NSU cell, while extreme, had deeper roots in German society in the form of a hegemonic component of national identity: white supremacy. And so white supremacist incidents continue to fall short of being true turning points; to treat them as such, even if one wanted to do so, would require a serious confrontation with how white Germans benefit from white supremacist institutions. Even well-intentioned white people are inclined to resist such a confrontation because they benefit from white supremacy as a system.

forward with information, and the intelligence services will come forward with information, and it'll be the same information, but they don't know that they have the same information."

²⁰For context, the BfV increased the number of analysts in Department Two, responsible for tracking domestic right-wing extremists, by 50 percent in 2019 following right-wing incidents in the city of Chemnitz. This is a sizable increase—about one hundred personnel, though exact numbers are kept secret—and so it is notable that calls for more personnel persist.

As one interlocutor put it:

When it comes to left-wing terrorism or Islamist terrorism, the view is that this terrorism threatens society as a whole and the foundations of society: property rights, democracy, Christian values, Western values [switches to English and rolls eyes] whatever that means. [switches back to German] This is just my theory, but the victims [of far-right attacks] were "only" migrants.

I then asked them how they would know whether the government were taking the threat of white supremacist terrorism seriously. "More personnel," they said.

Conclusion

"What has changed?" a former bureaucrat said, reiterating my question. We were seated at a leafy café on the west side of Berlin, just over a month after Walter Lübcke's assassination. "The attack was legible²¹ for most Germans," they continued. "Lübcke is the great breaking point."

Once again, a white supremacist attack seems to merit a sea change in how a government discusses and makes counterterrorism policy. In this article, I have argued that despite discourse that constructs violent events as turning points for policy, such events actually demonstrate the persistence of existing power relationships in society. Using firsthand insights from national security elites in Germany, I have shown that in the case of white supremacist violence, even attacks and organizations referred to as "terrorist" do not receive the same treatment as those perceived to stem from other ideologies. The position of white supremacy as a hegemonic component of national identity in Germany means that to seriously reckon with the phenomenon of white supremacist violence would require questioning a system whose existence depends on not being questioned.

However, there are also implications beyond Germany. The precise construction of white supremacist power structures may differ across white-majority countries, with the primary "Other" varying from Muslims in France to Black people in the United States to aboriginal people in Australia. What is comparable, however, is white supremacy's interest in perpetuating itself, and so we should expect to observe similar dynamics to those playing out in Germany in any country where white supremacy is a hegemonic component of national identity.

The logic presented here is also useful for explaining responses to ideologies and movements that challenge other hegemonic components of national identity. Using this framework, reactions of alleged human rights advocates to violence that challenges the status quo in their countries may seem less out of character, as in the case of Aung San Suu Kyi's defense of the genocide against the Rohingya in Myanmar following separatist violence (Bowcott 2019). The framework also sheds light on how governments allow non-governmental actors to respond to violence that upholds hegemonic components of national identity, as in the case of an Italian court overturning Facebook's de-platforming of racist organization CasaPound (Amante 2019). Viewing counterterrorism policy as a process of elites asserting control over conceptualizations of national identity underscores the politics in policymaking, shifting our focus from assessing "objective" threat levels to asking what power structures are perceived as under threat, and how the process of threat construction is ultimately about preserving political power.

²¹My interlocutor used *fassbar*, which is difficult to translate directly. The word means graspable in the sense that something resonates or fits into existing scripts.

As a result, my theory suggests that attempts to counter political violence that supports existing power structures will encounter significant roadblocks. To paraphrase feminist scholar Sara Ahmed, changing white supremacist institutions requires more than simply intending not to perpetuate them (Ahmed 2016, 150). Policymakers seeking to situate white supremacist violence—or any violence that challenges a hegemonic national identity—as a more significant national security priority will require not only more resources, but also profound and widespread attitudinal changes with respect to what threats are and whence they come.

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