

CREST

Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats



# SIEGE CULTURE AS A SUBCULTURE

**LARPocalypse: Part One**

**FULL REPORT**

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# SIEGE CULTURE AS A SUBCULTURE

## LARPocalypse: Part One

### FULL REPORT

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This is the first of three CREST reports analysing Siege Culture from a subcultural perspective with a focus on whether subcultural participation has the potential to be a protective factor against violence. You can find all the outputs from this project at: [www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/](http://www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/)

#### ABOUT CREST

The Centre for Research and Evidence on Security Threats (CREST) is funded by the UK's Home Office and security and intelligence agencies to identify and produce social science that enhances their understanding of security threats and capacity to counter them. Its funding is administered by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC Award ES/V002775/1).

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## OVERVIEW

- This is the first of three reports analysing Siege Culture from a subcultural perspective with a focus on whether subcultural participation has the potential to be a protective factor against violence.
- It provides an overview of the development of Siege Culture with an emphasis on the role of defiance, youth, style, and organisational fluidity.
- It then goes on to review subcultural theory as currently used in terrorism studies, including a focus on radicalisation and calls for greater attention to be paid to wider social settings.
- The conclusion suggests that Siege Culture can be interpreted as a subculture and that doing so allows for a better and more granular understanding of participation in Siege Culture.

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## SIEGE CULTURE

- Siege Culture is used as shorthand for a distinctive grouping within the extreme-right centred on the book *Siege* by US neo-Nazi James Mason.
- The core beliefs of Siege Culture are:
  - A focus on an imagined community of whites (Aryans), that is fiercely anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, homophobic, and racist in outlook.
  - Adherents view themselves as being special, even amongst others in the extreme-right.
  - Arrayed against Siege Culture is “the system”, a combination of big brother and the Zionist occupation government (ZOG) filtered through a general loathing of the establishment.

- Supporters believe their interpretation of fascism is fundamental and incorruptible, representing a universal natural truth that cannot be compromised.
- Accelerationism is a core tenet of Siege Culture; participants believe that societal collapse should be hastened through acts of terrorism.

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## DEVELOPMENT

- National Action 2013-2016
  - Siege Culture in the UK begins with the creation of National Action in 2013, well before the book *Siege* re-emerged.
  - National Action was intended to be a legal national socialist group with a focus on youth activism and style but was proscribed in December 2016.
- Atomisation and Americanisation: 2016-17
  - *Siege* was (re)popularised on the web forum Iron March from 2016 onwards.
  - *Siege* and author James Mason were championed by US neo-Nazi group Atomwaffen Division.
  - Coupled with the use of distinctive aesthetics, shared internationally, this growing profile resulted in the emergence of an identifiable Siege Culture.
- Cultic Drift 2017-2021
  - From 2017 there was clear evidence of a growing influence of spirituality and in particular Satanism in Siege Culture.

- New leadership within Atomwaffen exhibited ties to left hand path Satanism and this was echoed in the UK group Sonnenkrieg Division.
- The cultic phase of Siege Culture in the UK produced some of the most lurid headlines and concerning details, including possession of indecent images of children and interest in and actual cases of sexual violence.

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## THE NON-VIOLENCE PARADOX

- Siege, despite its militant presentation and connections to violence (including murder) and terrorist plotting activity, resulted in fewer successfully completed terrorist attacks than might have been expected.
- This can be explained in many ways including the vulnerability of Siege Culture to law enforcement and limiting factors within Siege itself.
- This does not rule out more violence from future ideological developments.
- One further possibility is that the emergent subculture around Siege and related groups acted as a check on serious violence as participants were reluctant to give up access to the benefits provided by the subculture.

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## SIEGE CULTURE AS SUBCULTURE

- Subcultures are groups of people that stand apart from mainstream norms, often framed as being somehow opposed to the ‘normal’ way of things.
- Subcultures are generally held to be associated with young people.
- Criminal and political explanations for subcultural formation have informed much of subcultural research.
- Rejection of mainstream social norms in many

youth subcultures has also been achieved through conscious use of style and expression.

- Subcultural theory has developed some traction within terrorism studies. The dominant preoccupation of this research has been to explain radicalisation using subcultural theory.
- Some research however has focused more on the stylistic appeal and internal meaning of subcultures for participants.

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## CONCLUSION

- Siege Culture can be interpreted as a subculture for four reasons:
  - The purposeful and defiant inversion of mainstream norms and values.
  - The focus on youth.
  - The importance attached to style and presentation.
  - Its organisation as a complex network of overlapping groups, ideologues, and individual actors.
- This does not mean that the political and revolutionary aspects of Siege Culture can be disregarded, only that they need to be considered alongside the stylistic aspects.
- A subcultural analysis of Siege Culture is useful for research for four reasons:
  - The concept of subculture can encompass branded groups, influencers and actor within a broader milieu of shared values and beliefs.
  - Subculture allows us to think about and take seriously the stylistic elements present in Siege Culture and their meanings.
  - Subculture reflects that adherents are free to participate as much or as little as they like and have lives outside of Siege Culture.

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### Siege as a Subculture

- Most importantly, subculture promotes the possibility of different roles, many non-violent, for individual actors within the broader subculture (discussed more in the next report).
- While uncomfortable, considering Siege Culture from a subcultural perspective provides an opportunity for a more granular understanding of participation and its meaning for participants.
- This in turn allows for a more holistic consideration of the risks to individuals and wider security threats posed by Siege Culture.

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# OVERVIEW

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This is the first of three reports which explores the potential for subcultural theory to help interpret the constraints and protections that might reduce the potential for violence in extreme-right subcultures. Running throughout the series is the argument that various forms of right-wing extremism can be analysed as a series of overlapping subcultures. Extreme-right subcultures propagate and normalise deviant beliefs and values which includes the hatred of outgroups and the acceptability or celebration of violence. However, participation in subcultures is differentiated, not uniform. Violent roles, including terrorist roles, account for a minority of actors; for most participants, most of the time, participation is non-violent. Specific roles may grant participants significant rewards they find unobtainable within the bounds of mainstream culture or other pro-social subcultures. Rewards may include opportunities to use creative skills, form social bonds, and obtain recognition and status from a peer group. Violent roles, including terrorist roles, come with high potential costs. Moving from a non-violent role to a violent one risks destabilising or cutting off other roles within a subculture and their associated rewards. In effect terrorist actors cash in their current role and any rewards, trading them for a single and temporary opportunity to play a terrorist role.

In some subcultures such actors are celebrated (“saints”) but the near certainty of death or incarceration as the result of becoming a known terrorist actor means that any further participation in the subculture, and therefore access to further rewards, is curtailed. This has the potential to help explain the seeming inertia of much of the extreme-right. Many of those embedded in subcultures, particularly tightly knit ones such as Siege Culture (the featured case study), are generally satisfied with their lot and are not likely to cash in. It also highlights the risks that come with instability within extreme subcultures. Where individuals lose access to roles and rewards e.g., through legal action or

internal dissent, then judgements around the benefits and costs of cashing in may change.

This report is designed to lay the groundwork for this argument by isolating and discussing the emergence of a particular subculture in the context of the UK, termed here Siege Culture. What follows sets out the development of Siege Culture in the UK beginning with the formation of the proto-Siege group National Action, and continuing through the re-emergence of Siege internationally, UK splinter groups, and its eventual transformation and rebranding to a more general form of fascist accelerationism.

The report then provides an overview of subcultural theory from the perspective of terrorism studies before identifying the aspects of Siege Culture that could plausibly mark it as a subculture. These include its unique presentation and heavy emphasis on stylistic elements and their meaning for protagonists. Participation in Siege Culture can be viewed both as a political project and a stylistic one as protagonists seek to present themselves in specific ways to conform with the Siege Culture style and attitude. This does not negate the damage wrought by Siege and its adherents which includes murder and terrorism, but rather suggests that these were not the sole rewards of participation and that attention ought to be paid to roles other than violent ones. Subsequent reports will build on these arguments to identify the different roles present in Siege Culture and their potential connection to specific rewards (part two) as well as the potential overall constraining effect of these mechanics (part three).

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# SIEGE CULTURE

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“We don’t wish to rock the boat, we intend to sink it!”

(Mason, 2003: n.p.)

This section provides background detail on Siege Culture with a focus on core ideas and how it emerged in the UK. Siege Culture is used here as a shorthand to refer to a distinctive grouping within the extreme-right. Although the majority of groups and spaces discussed were components of Siege Culture at one point or another, some (notably the UK’s National Action) pre-dated the rise of Siege Culture. This is set out in more detail below. Other labels that have been used to refer to Siege Culture include fascist futurism<sup>1</sup>, skull mask network,<sup>2</sup> and accelerationism.<sup>3</sup> The use of Siege Culture in this report reflects both the author’s own experiences of researching this space and the influence in particular of the Siege Culture website.

While it sometimes dominates public and policy attention, Siege Culture is a fringe movement within a fringe. The majority of those on the far-right, or even the actively revolutionary extreme-right, are not associated with Siege Culture. Some may regard it with distaste or suspicion, too extreme even for those we think of as being on the absolute margins of society. It draws on several ideological influences, including fascism, neo-Nazism, occultism, dark-fandoms (especially in respect to Charles Manson),<sup>4</sup> futurism and accelerationism.

The volume *Siege*, authored by US neo-Nazi James Mason, is as close to a core text as can be found. It

set the ideological tone and many of the important ideas present in the text remain common currency. In addition to *Siege* itself there have been several other important ideological inputs. These include the ideological development undertaken on the message board Iron March which has collectively published several texts, under the steerage of key forum members such as Alexander Slavros (real name Alisher Mukhitdinov) (see: Soshnikov 2020), and Zieger (real name: Gabriel Chaput) (see: Lamoureux 2023). This project was apparently continued under the banner of the Wewelsburg Archives (sometimes Wewelsburg Library) after the closure of Iron March.

Further ideological groundwork has been laid in various reading lists associated with specific groups influenced by Siege Culture, most notably Atomwaffen Divison (AWD), and through podcasts and other types of non-text content such as the Fascism 101 series (otherwise known as F101) of podcasts which aimed to provide a basic introduction to fascism. Finally, James Mason, and a stable of sympathetic writers still contribute to the overall Siege subculture via various websites, including the now defunct Siege Culture website, and (currently active but no longer affiliated with Mason) American Futurist website. Siege Culture is atomised, incoherent, and lacks any clear unifying authority.

What follows discusses some key ideological concepts associated with Siege Culture and then provides a sense of how the subculture has evolved over time, primarily from a UK perspective.

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1 Fascist futurism is a term often used to describe the ideological development taking place on Iron March prior to the re-popularisation of Siege. The name is derived from the artistic movement Futurism which inspired early fascists (The Economist 2019). American Futurism was the title of an early political manifesto produced by Alexander Slavros, the founder of Iron March (see below) (Slavros 2013; see also CTEC Staff 2022).

2 A reference to the skull-mask face coverings frequently used by groups within the Siege Culture space (Upchurch 2021).

3 Discussed further below but in this context a political strategy in which violence and terrorism is seen as pushing society further and faster toward total collapse and an opportunity for re-birth. Although the use of the term has varied, accelerationism has been a key feature of Siege Culture.

4 Dark Fandoms is a concept used to describe fans of those who have undertaken “heinous acts” (Broll 2020). So called “Columbiners”, fans of the mass murderers Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris, are a prominent example these types of communities (Broll 2020: 797). Charles Manson was a 1960’s era cult leader whose followers were responsible for several murders including the much-publicised killing of Sharon Tate (see: Bugliosi 1974).



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## KEY CONCEPTS

### ELITISM/INGROUP

The roots of Siege Culture lie in national socialism and neo-Nazism, particularly the American Nazi Party and the National Socialist Liberation Front, both supported by key ideologue James Mason. As a result, Siege Culture reflects many of the same in-group characteristics such as: neo-Nazism, focusing on an imagined community of whites (Aryans), and being fiercely anti-Communist, anti-Semitic, and racist in outlook. The imagined end point, expressed by the founder of influential message board Iron March, Slavros in *Zero Tolerance*, is “TOTAL ARYAN VICTORY” (2017). The precise meaning of Aryan however is left open. Slavros himself has central Asian heritage (Uzbek) and his own background in the Russian extreme-right scene suggests a very different understanding of Aryanism than found in the racial hierarchies of the original Nazi Party for example (Soshnikov 2020).

Beyond the racial in-group, a core tenant of Siege Culture is elitism. Adherents view themselves as being special, even amongst others in the extreme-right and other Aryans. Refusing to compromise their views in deference to building a wider political movement or to win support from less militant supporters (Slavros 2017). Others even on the extreme-right are viewed as insufficiently committed to the ideals espoused within Siege Culture. A similar idea is present in Siege, much of which is dedicated to criticising the US National Socialist Movement for its failings.

**“Why, for example, talk out of the side of your mouth in legalistic euphemisms appealing to the noble instincts of a handful of Right Wing types while the bottom line must always come down to revolution, which scares them off?”**

**(Mason 2003: 23)**

Siege Culture also maintains a commitment towards striving towards higher ideals sometimes bordering on the supernatural, further separating Siege Culture adherents in their own minds from ‘standard’ Nazis. An undated document attributed to ironmarch.org called *The Awakening of a National Socialist* offers greater insight into attempts to paint Siege Culture supporters as being elites, offering three “Patron Spirits” of National Socialism for adherents to strive towards: the scholar, the warrior, and the adventurer (ironmarch.org, n.d.: 12). These archetypes allow supporters to strive to be something special and more developed than the ordinary, engendering a sense of exceptionalism.

### THE SYSTEM

Arrayed against Siege Culture adherents is “the system”, a nightmarish combination of big brother and the Zionist occupation government (ZOG) filtered through the general loathing of the establishment influenced by 60s counterculture. The system is more than just the government, and encompasses all expressions of government and capitalism, describing them as “branch offices of a single monstrous SYSTEM” (Mason 2003: 155, capitalisation in the original). The system is envisioned as holding total power, having succeeded in removing any opposition. Having done so it has then gone on to lose control, unable to prevent itself from breaking apart (Mason 2003: 336). The system is portrayed by Mason as being the last gasp of a dying order:

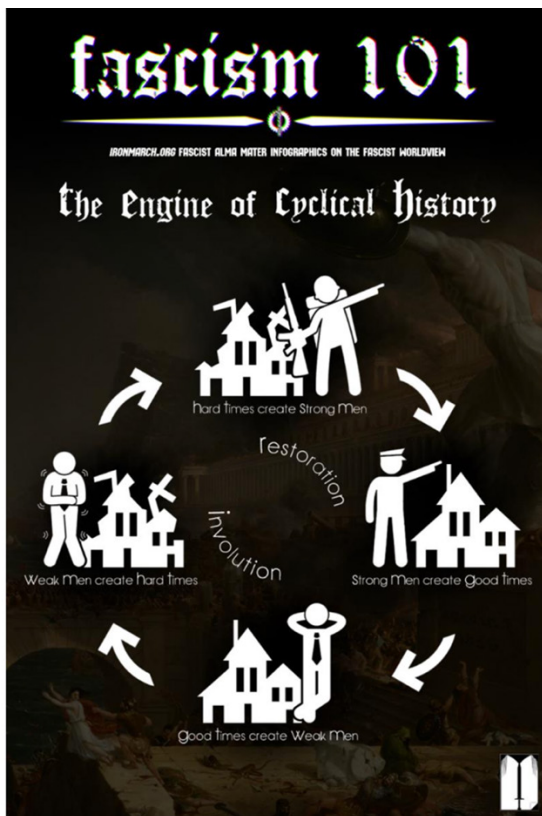
**“...trying desperately to hold their System together as long as possible, to suck as much blood as they can out of the dwindling number of productive Americans before it all finally goes to hell.”**

**(Mason 2003: 146)**

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Similar ideas have emerged through Iron March which, in common with other cyclical views of history, maintains the position that societies are currently in a period of “involution” or decline brought on by “weak men” (Slavros 2017).



Our "allies," Weak Men, idolize the Good Times which THEY have ruined and think it will take more of their WEAKNESS to fix it. Reality is that these Hard Times can only be fixed by STRONG MEN - only Fascists, only National Socialists.

Source: Slavros 2017:83

Like other forms of national socialism, culture and the media are seen as key tools in the system's arsenal (Mason 2003: 149). By creating such an expansive outgroup, Mason expands the traditional target group of violent right-wing actors. While retaining the traditional hatred of Jewish and black people, Mason expands this to include almost everyone else who is considered in the thrall of a Jewish dominated system. Mason does not pull any punches when detailing what he believes should happen to “system agents”:

**“They are the ruling class. If we are to play by their set rules, as we must, then one of them is co- equal to all the rest, as guilty as the next. To participate in this anti-White conspiracy is a crime that shall**

**be punished by death. And no appeals are granted by the Revolutionary Court.”**

(Mason 2003: 155)

*Siege* actively celebrates those who fight-back against the system (called live wires) although it is at times also coy, suggesting that violence needs to be lethal to be effective (“only head shots are worth risking your ass on” (Mason 2003: 198)), and offering protagonists who choose instead to dig in and drop out some rhetorical cover:

**“A third option, of course, is to withdraw totally from it all and dig in as deeply as possible with the expectation of surviving once all the rest has been blown away and has blown over.”**

(Mason 2003: 218)

## TRUTH/UNIVERSAL ORDER

In line with Siege Culture supporters positioning themselves as innately superior to others, even others on the extreme-right, is the idea that their interpretation of national socialism or fascism is fundamental and incorruptible, somehow representing a universal truth that cannot be ignored. Mason expressed this idea as Universal Order, a doctrine developed and coined through correspondence with US cult leader Charles Manson (Mason 2003: 337). Mason describes Universal Order as:

**“...everything National Socialism is and much, much more. It is geared to the present conditions. It is as dynamic as- maybe more so than- National Socialism because its true leader is alive, a contemporary of all of us. It is uniquely "American" and it is NOW. It has no links whatsoever with Conservatism or the Right Wing (or the Left, for that matter). It largely disarms the Enemy because he doesn't know what to expect of**

**it or how to deal with it. It has fascination and appeal to YOUTH.”**

**(Mason 2003: 334)**

Elaborating further, Mason envisages Universal Order as an elemental solution for all human problems, something akin to a truth that is the only way of dealing with reality, while all other approaches represent some manner of compromise or lie (Mason 2003: 336). This logic was retraced by Alexander Slavros in *Zero Tolerance*, a 2017 publication which drew heavily on Siege. Focused squarely on the (then) ascendent Alt-Right, Slavros argues that the Alt-Right is closer to enemies of fascism than to true fascists. Comparing the end goals of Siege Culture and the Alt-Right, Slavros outlines the imagined end state of his interpretation of national socialism:

**“Total Aryan Victory means the absolute global dominance of the Fascist/NS Worldview across the entire world which is guided by the descendants of the original Aryan race who had once again lived up to the glory of their ancestors and answered the eternal call of their blood! TOTAL ARYAN VICTORY MEANS A PAX ARYANA!”**

**(Slavros 2017: 89)**

This goal, Slavros argues, can only be achieved by following “eternal laws” and adhering to the natural “grand Hierarchy of Hierarchies” (Slavros 2017: 89).

## ACCELERATIONISM/STRATEGY

Central to the premise of Siege Culture is accelerationism. Accelerationism is so closely associated with Siege Culture that it has come to define the space for many. Although this name has stuck, accelerationism does not just refer to ultra-extreme neo-Nazi groups but instead is more of an abstract philosophical school with left and right wing variants (Parker 2020). Many advocates of which do

not see complete societal collapse as the end goal (e.g., Williams & Srnicek 2013).

Accelerationism, used in the context of the extreme-right describes a political strategy that assumes societies are heading for an impending social or political collapse. Advocates of fascist brands of accelerationism believe that collapse can and should be hastened through acts of terrorism designed to exacerbate inherent tensions within societies, for example by stoking racial resentment, highlighting economic inequalities, or provoking backlashes against potential extreme-right supporters for example through seizing firearms. One definition of “militant accelerationism” offered by the Accelerationism Research Consortium is:

**“Militant accelerationism is a set of tactics and strategies designed to put pressure on and exacerbate latent social divisions, often through violence, thus hastening societal collapse.”**

**(Kriner n.d.)**

Kriner goes on to distinguish between implicit accelerationists that subscribe loosely to accelerationist tactics but do not overtly identify as accelerationists (e.g., the Proud Boys), and explicit accelerationists who understand themselves as deliberately engaging in this strategy. Siege Culture is an example of explicit accelerationism (Kriner n.d.).

As a philosophy accelerationism has roots in Marxist thought, Italian futurism, science fiction, and neo-reactionary philosophy (Beckett 2017). In its original form accelerationism was simply a desire to speed up change and embrace progress to various ends, some of them left-leaning and progressive (see: Williams & Srnicek 2013). A core thinker in accelerationism, but one often rejected by more benign accelerationists, is British philosopher Nick Land. Before leaving academia in the 90s Land was based in the philosophy department at the University of Warwick (Beckett

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2017).<sup>5</sup> Along with other researchers Land's work later contributed to the bizarrely cultish Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU). Following the collapse of CCRU and a period of wandering, Land went on to become a key figure in the right-leaning neo-reactionary movement (see: Burrows 2018). Infused with post-humanism and associated corporate titans such as Peter Thiel (Beckett 2017), neo-reactionary accelerationism is deeply at odds with traditional national socialism and it is not clear, aside from being anti-democratic and eugenicist, that the political end goals of philosophical accelerationism and what has become Siege Culture are entirely compatible.

The term accelerationism does not feature in Siege which predates CCRU by some years, however there are clear tonal overlaps with accelerationist thinking within Mason's text, in particular the conviction that, on their current trajectory, societies are doomed to collapse:

**“We want to see crime and chaos rise to such a degree where the System becomes no longer viable and falls apart. We want to see them lose control, not increase it. We want to hasten the death of the System, not postpone it.”**

**(Mason 2003: 146)**

The term accelerationism itself more than likely entered Siege Culture through Iron March although it is difficult to say precisely how. In all probability this apparent convergence came about by key actors drawing on a similar pool of ideas. Like CCRU, early Iron March publications such as the *American Futurist Manifesto* (Slavros 2013) are steeped in Italian Futurism, an intellectual and artistic movement that celebrated power, speed and industry. The document includes the line:

**“We aim to do that [collapse the American system] by utilizing its own systems, technology and mechanisms against it. We will jump at the wheel of American civilization and push it into overdrive until it crashes and burns, forcing us into a clean slate.”**

**(Slavros 2013: 6)**

Continuing in the same vein, the 2015 volume *Next Leap* offers a strategy of “purposely accelerating the degeneration of the Modern World” as one possible option for readers, attributing it to the Italian philosopher Julius Evola. This is also in keeping with philosophical interpretations of accelerationism with support for progressive policies permitted (i.e., jumping at rather than opposing the wheel) as they are seen as contributing to the ultimate downfall of civilisation and thereby making way for a return to a more traditional state (Iron March 2015: 24).

Overall discussion of accelerationism on Iron March itself also conforms to the original interpretation of accelerationism as opposed to an explicit terroristic strategy. For example, the term was used in connection to the government response to Charlottesville, the Clinton campaign, and the candidacy of Marine Le Pen in the 2017 French election. These events were held to be accelerationist as they would drive more people towards a fascist worldview.

The credibility of accelerationism, and the willingness of Siege Culture advocates to explicitly incorporate it into their branding and advocate it as a strategy, was likely increased by the 2019 manifesto of Brenton Tarrant. The manifesto was accompanied by a murderous rampage that targeted two Christchurch Mosques, leaving 51 dead, a further 40 injured, and a profound sense of international shock and outrage that resulted in the ‘Christchurch Call’ which calls for the elimination of online content

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<sup>5</sup> The same philosophy department was coincidentally, for a short time and much later, home to National Action cofounder Alex Davies as an undergraduate (Yip & Lovett 2014).

deemed terrorist or violent extremist (Christchurch Call). Tarrant's manifesto, *The Great Replacement*, included a section advocating for "destabilization and accelerationism", stating:

**"It is far better to encourage radical, violent change regardless of its origins. As only in times of radical change and social discomfort can great and terrific change occur."**

**(Tarrant 2019)**

There is little else in Tarrant's manifesto, or what we know of his history, to suggest he was part of what we think of as Siege Culture; all the evidence points to Tarrant being firmly embedded in a brand of chan-based white nationalism, often looked down on by many Siege Culture advocates as being unserious. This disconnect was overlooked in some of the media response which sought to locate Tarrant in the same conceptual bucket as Atomwaffen, branding them all as accelerationists (Beauchamp 2019; Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies 2021).

In summary, despite becoming closely associated with one another, the exact connection between philosophical accelerationism, accelerationism as a deliberate terroristic strategy, and Siege Culture is unclear. Despite the concept of accelerationism being present on Iron March it is not clear when accelerationism became a concerted strategy to justify extreme-right terrorism as opposed to a more abstract phenomenon in-built in techno-capitalist systems. Most likely, the present formulation of accelerationism in Siege Culture is syncretic, representing a conceptual and aesthetic smash and grab raid on the ideas and imagery of neo-reactionary philosophy. Propaganda output and the recent publication of the book *Militant Accelerationism* (in 2021) all strongly suggest that Siege Culture advocates have few issues with adopting the label even if much of the philosophy was abandoned.

## EVOLUTION OF SIEGE CULTURE IN THE UK

Siege Culture is not static but has continued to evolve over time. In the UK the local manifestation of Siege Culture has developed in conversation with a variety of other extreme-right subcultures transnationally. There have been three distinct phases of development, characterised by a shift in organisation, ideas, and style.

1. National Action 2013-2016
2. Atomisation and Americanisation 2016-17
3. Cultic Drift 2017-2021

Although many of these phases are defined and orientated around specific Siege Culture groups (e.g., Sonnenkrieg) readers should think of these as only the tip of an iceberg. No Siege Culture inspired group has ever amassed much more than a hundred supporters, with most being much smaller and often ephemeral (Shadnia et al 2022). In contrast Iron March had 1,207 regular users when it was shuttered in November 2017 (Singer-Emery & Bray 2020). It is likely that a far greater number of users accessed content without establishing an account on the site, suggesting the influence of Siege Culture extends far beyond just the groups it inspired.

### PHASE ONE: NATIONAL ACTION 2013-2016

Siege Culture in the UK begins with the creation of National Action in 2013, well before *Siege* was repopularised. Intended to be a legal national socialist group with a focus on youth activism, youth, and style, National Action was founded by university graduate Benjamin Raymond and first year university student Alex Davies. Davies would eventually drop out of university as a result of his views (The Tab 2014a). The group was noted at the time for its innovative use of media, combining music and fascist slogans and imagery from demonstrations, as well as attempts to shock and provoke (Jackson 2014). One notable

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example being 21 year-old member Garron Helm's anti-Semitic Twitter campaign directed against Jewish Labour MP Luciana Berger (Liverpool Echo 2014).

Raymond and Davies were both previously involved with extreme-right groups: Raymond was active in the "micro-grouping" Integralist Party of Great Britain and Northern Ireland; Davies was previously a member of the young British National party (BNP) (Jackson 2014: 99). An early publication from National Action, *Strategy and Promotion*, revealed a dissatisfaction with the current nationalist scene in the UK and a desire to create something more impactful.

**"Fuzzy wuzzy doesn't work – 2x4's across the head work."**

**(National Action 2013: n.p.)**

The once dominant BNP was seen as being in decline, and National Action looked to alternative nationalist scenes for inspiration. They focused on Russian nationalism, with *Strategy and Promotion* including example images from the Russian neo-Nazi group Wotan Jugend and MMA clothing brand White-Rex. *Strategy and Promotion* also includes a reference to the Autonomous Nationalists UK, suggesting that the authors were likely familiar with Autonomous Nationalists in Germany. This is another youth centred extreme-right group, distinguished by its willingness to adopt provocative tactics more usually associated with the far left and in direct opposition to more staid iterations of neo-Nazism in Germany (see: Pisiou & Lang 2014). Raymond discussed the decisions they took in setting up National Action in a 2016 interview with US-based publisher Gregg Johnson:

**"Okay, so I began working with Alex Davies, and what we decided to do was basically rebrand nationalism. The problem with white nationalists is, God bless them, they're not very inventive with the way they present themselves."**

**(Benjamin Raymond 2016)**

In keeping with the desire to break with established nationalism in the UK and change the way it was presented, National Action's action repertoire was intentionally aggressive and provocative. In 2014 *National Action: Year Review* summarised early campaigning, focusing on demonstrations, banner drops, the targeting of universities with promotional material, and revelling in condemnation from the mainstream media and positive mentions from extreme-right websites such as the Daily Stormer (National Action 2014). Despite the intentional edgy image, National Action also maintained that it was an advocacy group as opposed to being involved in a "criminal conspiracy", suggesting that it was attempting at least to remain on the right side of the law (National Action 2014: n.p.). Despite this, in his 2022 trial co-founder Alex Davies said that he understood the concerns that surrounded the group and its potential trajectory (South Wales Argus 2022).

National Action were also active internationally. In 2014 or 2015 Benjamin Raymond met American Brandon Russell in London, Russell was the leader of the US-based neo-Nazi group, and baseline Siege Culture group Atomwaffen Division, founded in 2015 (although some accounts date the founding of the group to 2013) (Independent 2021). Members of National Action were active on the influential web forum Iron March, which was also closely associated with Atomwaffen, suggesting further relationships. When National Action were proscribed in December 2016, articles from the National Action website were published on Iron March to preserve them.

There are possible hints at a knowledge of *Siege* within National Action, although this is nowhere near as developed as in the groups that followed them. A 2013 article published on the group's website – National Action – Here and Now! – makes extensive references to the System. Overall National Action pre-date the Siege Culture but did lay the groundwork. Many of their ideas such as the need to reject past movement failures, the emphasis on youth, and the commitment to aggression, being compatible with the ideas in *Siege* and in Iron March publications.

## PHASE TWO: ATOMISATION AND AMERICANISATION: 2016-17

*Siege* was published as a newsletter between 1980 and 1986 and was compiled into a book in 1993. It was, at least according to the preface of the 2nd Edition, an instant hit with the buying public, while influential figures within “the movement” seemed to largely ignore it (Mason 2003: 10). *Siege* was re-discovered in around 2016. New leadership in Atomwaffen, who took over following the arrest and imprisonment of leader Brandon Russell in 2017, developed a more concrete connection with James Mason via the establishment of a dedicated Siege Culture website, elevating Mason to a kind of spiritual father of the group (SPLC n.d. a).

*Siege* had been present on Iron March for some time, with interest spiking between 2015 and 2017, going from 200 references to 700 (SPLC n.d. b). Iron March went offline towards the end of 2017, leaving a very small window (less than a year) between Atomwaffen’s collaboration with Mason and the end of Iron March. An article in *Noose*, a fascist ‘zine’ associated with Iron March published in July 2017, describes members of Atomwaffen tracking down Mason and cultivating a relationship with him in 2017.

*Siege* was a natural fit for the themes already present on Iron March and circulating within National Action, in particular its focus on the system, the coming collapse, the immutable truth of Universal Order, the fascination with violent actors, and its focus on youth. However, *Siege* was also a product of Mason’s experiences in the United States’ neo-Nazi scene. The focus on the US was at odds with nascent Siege Culture in the UK, and the transnational reach of Iron March. While *Siege* came to be the defining book for this space it represents a uniquely American perspective which can obscure the transnational connections and contradictions that underpin it.<sup>6</sup>

Having earlier exported the national socialist youth group model to the US via relationships with Russell

and Iron March, the UK scene was now in a period of fragmentation. Superficially the proscription of National Action in December 2016 was accepted by the group who publicly announced that they were disbanding following the ban. However, while the brand was discarded, the relationships that underpinned it remained in place and the overall National Action network seemed to dissolve into regional groupings, each taking on a different character with names like NS131 (standing for national socialist anti-capitalist action), Scottish Dawn, Vanguard Britannia, Triple K Mafia, and System Resistance Network (Collins 2019; Macklin 2018). Some, such as the group in North-West England led by Christopher Lythgoe, did not have a name. One theory is that National Action were drawing on the example of Al-Muhajiroun, a proscribed Salafi Jihadist group which was able to continue operating in one form or another by constant re-branding. Several of the successor groups were ultimately proscribed as being aliases of National Action (Home Office, n.d.).

Their fragmented character and short life span makes it difficult to assess the ideological basis of many of these successor groups. Material was published sporadically, often taken down quickly, and unlike National Action’s content it was seldom preserved. Some material from NS131’s web presence reveals a focus on banner drops, graffiti, and flag burnings, as well as videos aimed at recruitment, which also include Atomwaffen flags. Another successor group – System Resistance Network – which emerged in 2017, also demonstrated a clear connection to *Siege* in its rhetoric:

**“We are revolutionary National Socialists united by struggle; the struggle against the System. We are building a family of loyal and dedicated men & women who will not sit back while the storm clouds build. Our imperative is the destruction of the System.”**

**(System Resistance Network)**

6 Foremost of these is the doctrine of American Futurism was apparently coined by a Russian-Uzbek living in Moscow (Soshnikov 2020).

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#### PHASE THREE: CULTIC DRIFT 2017-2021

The 2017 arrest of Brandon Russell, one time leader of US-based Atomwaffen, and the change in leadership brought more change in Siege Culture more broadly. As well as cementing the connection to *Siege*, and James Mason, the new leadership, under John Cameron Denton (AKA Rape, AKA Vincent Snyder) (SPLC n.d.) also introduced a greater focus on the spiritual and cultic aspects of national socialism within the scene.

Iron March had already hinted at more mystic interpretation of national socialism. The 2015 Next Leap includes a section on the occult which is critical of “edgy” occultism but also retains space for magic and the occult, and the genuine belief that esotericism has potential for accessing and potentially controlling the immaterial, described as the “Superworld” (Iron March 2015). James Mason himself was at one point a believer in Christian Identity a loose collection of beliefs appropriated from mainstream Christianity that rejects the role of Jews in the bible. However, when asked about his opinion on national socialism as a “self-contained religion” in a 2017 interview with Atomwaffen, specifically referencing a growth in “esoteric Hitlerism”, Mason said he was of the view that:

**“If anybody was Esoteric, it was her. Savitri Devi [a key figure in the development of esoteric Hitlerism], or anybody who is pro-Hitler, Esoteric or not, is as good as gold.”**

**(Hangman 2017: n.p.)**

Alongside Esoteric Hitlerism was what seemed like a persistent background presence of left-hand path Satanism. In the US, the presence of Satanists within Atomwaffen led to a rift in the group, with an extensive posting on the site Medium serving to expose new leader Denton as a Satanist, specifically affiliated to the Order of the Nine Angles (ONA):

**“We WILL purge the Noctulian scum from our ranks, and never again will this happen. So, let us take a journey on how AtomWaffenDivision and Satanism are connected, or rather more specifically, Rape the de facto leader of AtomWaffenDivision and Satanism are connected.”**

**(Anon n.d. n.p.)**

The influence of occultism was also heavily present on Fascist Forge, a short-lived web forum that attempted to fill the place left by the closure of Iron March. Where Iron March became an ideological powerhouse, Fascist Forge floundered, at one point going offline altogether and then re-emerging with a renewed emphasis on security (Lamoureux 2019). Particularly notable was the practice of asking new members to introduce themselves on the forum and the hazing they would endure from established members (Lee & Knott 2021). Fascist Forge placed heavy emphasis on religion and belief, at one point purging all ‘Christian’ fascists, arguing that “Semitic desert cults” were not welcome. Member profiles would feature ever more cryptic and bizarre religious and ideological affiliations. Although it was used as a recruiting ground for the Base, another Siege Culture adjacent organisation, Fascist Forge was ultimately inward looking and nowhere near as ideologically productive as Iron March.

On the ground in the UK, reporting from campaign group Hope Not Hate identifies some ONA influence in National Action with unspecified paraphernalia found in the home of National Action member Garron Helm when he was arrested in 2017 (Hope not Hate 2019), and the presence of Ryan Fleming in National Action, a convicted paedophile and affiliate of the ONA (DeSimone 2021). The influence of occultism would come to greater prominence in the emergence of Sonnenkrieg Division, another ultra-extreme national socialist groupuscule which borrowed heavily from the Atomwaffen template. Anti-fascist research posted publicly on the site Medium identifies Sonnenkrieg as



emerging via Gab in Summer 2018, with a series of new posters, some of which linked to the then Siege Culture site [siegeculture.biz](http://siegeculture.biz) (Subcomandante X 2018).

Subsequent information puts Sonnenkrieg as an offshoot of the System Resistance Network, itself an offshoot of National Action. ONA influenced Satanism was reportedly a more overt presence in Sonnenkrieg Division, with supporters often referencing key terms linked to ONA (Hope Not Hate 2019). Two teenaged members of Sonnenkrieg Division were sentenced for terror offences in 2019: Michal Szewczuk (19) two counts of encouraging terrorism, five counts of documents useful to a terrorist; and Oskar Dunn-Koczorowski (18), two counts of encouraging terrorism (BBC 2019a). Sexual violence was a noted feature of the case. It later emerged that Sonnenkrieg was founded by the now imprisoned Andrew Dymock who split from System Resistance Network in a dispute over the role of Satanism (De Simone 2021). Sonnenkrieg was ultimately proscribed in February 2020 (Counter Terrorism Policing 2020).

The Cultic phase of Siege Culture in the UK produced some of the most lurid headlines and concerning details, including possession of indecent images of children and interest in and actual cases of sexual violence. Under the influence of Atomwaffen, Iron March, and the transnational Siege subculture, the UK variant of Siege Culture became darker even than National Action's "white jihad".

The peak of the cultic phase in 2019 also coincided with a wave of extreme-right terrorism in the US, Germany and New Zealand, including the murder of 51 people in a live streamed attack on two mosques in New Zealand. Despite this, it is difficult to conclude that the cultic drift exhibited by Siege Culture, and the continuing disputes it generates, is anything but a decline: a continued move away from any form of concerted organisation and a source of increasingly inward-looking disputes over ideology.

Although the potential for lone actor terrorism remained, including in the penchant many supporters had for collecting bomb-making manuals as well as the innate militancy of *Siege* itself, there seems to have been little appetite by Siege Culture activists to translate this into direct action.<sup>7</sup>

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## THE NON-VIOLENCE PARADOX

Siege Culture represents perhaps one of the most extreme interpretations of fascism yet seen. That such ideas were able to develop and spread online is a testament to the ability of the internet to bring supporters of ever more fringe ideologies into networks with one another. Accelerationism, filtered through the prism of Siege seeks to maintain as violent and militant an image as possible, and the evolution of Siege Culture in the UK has been a slide towards seemingly ever more controversial and antagonistic positions. Beginning with National Action's advocacy of National Socialism, it ended with the Satanism, paedophilia and rape espoused by Sonnenkrieg. Despite this, the comparatively limited violence associated with Siege Culture has been at odds with its cultivated militant image.

In the United States Atomwaffen is frequently cited as being linked to five murders. However, two of these murders were committed by a former member of Atomwaffen against two current members. Two further murders were directed against the parents of a member's girlfriend who disapproved of his views. Only the murder of Blaze Bernstein, a gay Jewish student, comes close to fitting the conventional understanding of a terrorist attack, even here the victim was known to his attacker (Jackson 2020).

In the UK only Zack Davies is a candidate for a successful Siege Culture inspired terrorist, but even here the connections between Davies and National Action are blurred, and the specifics of Davies' ideological position, beyond his hatred of non-whites,

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7 For more on convictions and sentences linked to the extreme-right in the UK see: Lee, Reder & Greig (2023)

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a fascination with Nazism, and wishing to avenge the death of Lee Rigby, are hard to fathom (Morris 2015). A recent analysis of right-wing terrorist actors in the UK noted the prevalence of older males amongst successful attackers in stark contrast with National Action and Siege Culture's explicit youth focus (Wells 2023). More broadly, an arson attack on a Swedish mink farm (Weber et al 2021), and a failed bombing of a Western Union office in Vilnius (Meilutis, 2020), are typical of the available public data on terrorism emerging from Siege Culture.

Far more frequent in the UK have been arrests made against those who have been caught planning to engage in violence, although the maturity and viability of different plots remains open to question. In the UK, Jack Renshaw was sentenced to 20 years for a plot to kill his local MP and a police officer investigating Renshaw for child grooming. Renshaw's plans were uncovered after he disclosed them to the unnamed North-West cell he associated with (BBC 2019b). Renshaw was not convicted of being a member of National Action. Likewise, others have been convicted for plots, none of which have materialised. More commonly, Siege Culture protagonists have been convicted of membership offences, encouraging terrorism, and the possession of documents useful for terrorism (BBC 2021; Lee, Reder & Greig 2023).

There is no single explanation for this apparent lack of successful terrorist attacks. One possibility is that the crackdown on Siege Culture following the proscription of National Action has allowed UK law enforcement to intervene early, preventing more concrete plots from developing. This is likely compounded by the tendency of Siege Culture advocates, despite the lessons of the 1980s and the emergence of Leaderless Resistance as a foundational doctrine, to organise into groups (see: Kaplan 1997). Networks communicating online, even through anonymous and encrypted methods, have proved extremely vulnerable to law enforcement activity. While this theory is appealing, the lack of Siege Culture related terrorism in jurisdictions with fewer powers than UK law enforcement possibly

suggests that the UK subculture would have remained similarly passive.

A second possibility lies in *Siege* itself. Within the text, and despite its overall militancy, Mason offers a justification for not engaging in violence. He suggests that followers make a choice between total attack, and total drop out:

**“There are but two separate choices as regards strategies and courses of action for any who consider themselves members of the Movement: TOTAL ATTACK or TOTAL DROP-OUT. These are the opposite ends of the revolutionary spectrum. While the former is the more blazing and heroic, it is the latter, by far, that I favor and would urge all comrades to adopt. I favor the latter as the only sane and realistic choice.”**

(Mason 2003: 370)

For those who are intent on doing violence Mason urges them not to waste their lives and to make attacks count, offering up various examples of individuals whose efforts have shaken up the system, foremost among them being Charles Manson (Mason 2003: 301). Mason however is careful to counsel that dropping out is the far smarter choice, advocating that followers should do everything they can to insulate themselves from the system. Ideologically, this choice insulates protagonists from allegations of hypocrisy. For followers of Siege Culture, the exemption from death or lengthy imprisonment was already baked into the ideology.

A third and final possibility, lies in the make-up and composition of Siege Culture as a subculture and specifically the idea of subcultural constraint. Subcultures are not uniform but offer participants a choice of potential roles which may be undertaken successfully or unsuccessfully, and lead to potential rewards. Even in superficially extreme settings that praise violence and break taboos, the rewards for

participation are often relatively mundane, allowing individuals to access rewards that those in mainstream often take for granted, for example socialising with others, access to creative outlets, recognition by peers, and the need to reject or rebel against mainstream norms and values.

Mass casualty violence such as terrorism would likely jeopardise the ongoing access to rewards that participants depend on. While we tend to see extremist engagement like this as the top of a slippery slope towards violence, for many becoming a lone actor terrorist would instead signal the end of involvement and access to the rewards that participation offers through either death or, more often, imprisonment. Overall, despite its revolutionary gloss many of those involved in Siege Culture may be content with the status quo and unwilling to engage in actions that would alter it.

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## NEXT STEPS: MILITANT ACCELERATIONISM?

There is a final possible explanation for the non-violence paradox which is simply that we have not seen a Siege Culture inspired lone actor yet. There are signs that within the Siege Culture subculture there have been efforts to spur on lone actor terrorism and get over some of the perceived ideological and organisational baggage of the past (Macklin & Lee, forthcoming). A key trend has been calls for a rejection of branded groups and a reversion to leaderless resistance and cell-based models of organisation (see: Sweeney 2019). An essay published in August 2020 entitled *How to Assemble Your Squad* argued against online organisation altogether, suggesting that would-be participants focus on discrete and interpersonal local organising.

**This is where a lot of people take a wrong turn. They go online, look up a named group whose aesthetics they like, they join up, FINALLY having found like-minded people in this degenerate hellhole we**

**call our world... and before they know it, they're snatched in some not-so-elaborate FBI entrapment scheme, doxed, and filed in the System's list of enemies to keep a watchful eye on. How do you prevent this from happening to you?**

**First things first, AVOID named groups like the plague. If it's got a logo, a name, and an online presence, that's three strikes, run for your life. Having a public face does not benefit the group's members, on the contrary, it inconveniences them greatly, especially because it enables the System's troops – auxiliary AND regular – to monitor their activity much more easily. A child could do it!**

**(Source: How to Assemble your Squad)**

Similar themes were expressed in *Militant Accelerationism*, a 136 page book published via Telegram in June 2021 and attributed to the Terrorgram Collective. Heavily designed and published near simultaneously in English, Spanish, French and Portuguese, *Militant Accelerationism* was dedicated to mobilisation and encouraging direct action, ranging from relatively low-level sabotage to full terror-attacks. Included in the volume was *Highscores and Headlines*, a fictional account of a right-wing terror attack which concluded with a fictionalised newspaper front page reporting on the attack: one slogan being “*Finally! A saint of our own!*”, a seemingly tacit recognition that the author’s reference group, i.e., Siege Culture has yet to produce a terrorist spectacular to rival the more chan-orientated wave of attacks in 2019, or the longer lists of ‘saints’ frequently circulated on Telegram.

*Militant Accelerationism* was followed by several more books in the same vein from the Telegram Collective including: *Do It for the Gram*, and *The Hard Reset*, as well as the ‘documentary’ *White Terror*. In October 2022 two were killed and a third injured in a shooting outside a gay bar in Bratislava, Slovakia. In a manifesto

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published ahead of the attack the 19 year-old killer praised Terrorgram Collective's writings marking the first terror attack to directly reference the emerging accelerationist canon. Subsequent analysis suggests that at least one other person had a role in writing the manifesto (Kupper et al n.d.).

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## SUMMARY

While Terrorgram and accelerationism are seemingly in the ascendancy, barring any sudden outbreak of lone actor violence inspired directly by the subculture, the future of Siege Culture looks relatively bleak with the brand likely to be subsumed by a more inclusive and aggressive accelerationism. Most of the brands associated with the subculture have been suppressed in one way or another, with Atomwaffen dissolving itself in 2020 (Fisher-Birch 2020). Iron March and Fascist Forge are both long gone, and even once relatively tolerant Telegram has shut down some public channels. Outside of American Futurist and initiatives like the Webelsberg Archive, Siege Culture now lives in secure chat groups and dark social applications with limited opportunities to recruit on the open internet.

At the same time, the ideological footprint of the subculture remains relatively accessible for those prepared to search. This opens the possibility of syncretism, with disconnected lone actors drawing on the ideological material developed by Siege Culture and incorporating some or all of it into their own idiosyncratic worldviews. As global uncertainty and accelerated communications allow for the emergence of ever more niche and syncretic belief systems, the rich ideological heritage and uniquely militant aesthetics of Siege Culture may yet prove a valuable resource for those looking for a combined ideological and spiritual out.

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# SIEGE CULTURE AS SUBCULTURE<sup>8</sup>

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**“...culture matters- and it matters profoundly”**

**Hamm (2004: 337)**

Having set out some of the ideas and outlined the development of Siege Culture, this section develops the idea of Siege Culture as a culture, specifically a subculture. While subcultural theory is often synonymous with youth trends, music, and fan cultures, some of the earliest work on subcultures comes from the study of criminality and other spaces on the margins of illegality. The key idea is that as well as a terroristic ideology and collection of extremist groups, Siege Culture is also a subculture with its own set of beliefs and values. Rather than being dismissed as propaganda and a vehicle for radicalisation and terrorism, the unique presentation and style of Siege Culture should be understood as a central part of its meaning for protagonists.

As observed above, when viewed through the prevailing ideas of terrorism, radicalisation, and security, Siege Culture seems inherently limited. It has generated a large number of terrorism related cases and some plots but little in the way of actual violence and nothing to match the terrorist activities of the more internationally focused alt-right influenced attacks, or the violence of Jihadists. Nevertheless, the dominant approach to the study of Siege Culture has been firmly from a terrorism studies perspective, with research focusing on proscription (Macklin 2018), financing (Keatinge et al 2019), and organisation (Jackson 2014). Participation tends to be presented as binary, supporters are either in or out with few half measures. Ideas and narratives are considered universal, enshrined in doctrine and common to all. The internal dynamics of Siege Culture are typically understood as monolithic and participants

are more or less assumed to be the same.

This lack of granular detail is to be expected as we know frustratingly little about the internal dynamics, style, meanings, or practices of participants within Siege Culture. This series of reports is an attempt to add more detail and unpack the features of the extreme-right to understand the nuances and distinctions that characterise this space. The primary vehicle for this is through the idea of a subculture. Rather than viewing Siege Culture as just, or even primarily as a security threat, this report acknowledges that the vast majority of Siege Culture-related activity has not been addressed by researchers. Viewing Siege Culture as a subculture allows for a more nuanced understanding of its appeal and the behaviours of participants, including the aesthetics, status, and cachet it provides to protagonists. This is not an attempt to dismiss violence - actual or planned - associated with Siege Culture, both of which remain concerning. But we also need to understand that the intentional and performative violation of taboos, however extreme, is not unique to Siege Culture and is instead a common feature of many different subcultures.

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## WHAT IS A SUBCULTURE?

**“Subcultures are groups of people that are in some way represented as non-normative and/or marginal through their particular interests and practices, through what they are, what they do, and where they do it.”**

**(Gelder 2005: 1)**

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<sup>8</sup> A version of this section was published earlier as a report on Lethal Subcultures. See: Lee 2022.

## SIEGE CULTURE AS SUBCULTURE

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Subcultures are usually identified as groups of people that stand apart from mainstream norms, often framed as being somehow opposed to the 'normal' way of things: disordered as opposed to ordered, wandering as opposed to rooted (Gelder, 2005). However, subcultures are not wholly without values, they have internal logics, norms, and ways of being of their own. One study argues that all societies make and to some degree enforce various rules, and deviance occurs where individuals choose to break or reject those rules (Becker 1963: 8). Rejection of dominant social norms in many youth subcultures is achieved through style and expression. Dick Hebdige argues:

**“Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. Its transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’. As such, they are gestures, movements towards speech that offends the ‘silent majority’, which challenges the principle of unity and cohesion, which contradicts the myth of consensus.”**

**(Hebdige 1979: 19)**

A broad array of groups have been researched as subcultures. Gelder (2005) traces the pre-history of subcultural studies to literary interest in criminal and vagabond classes in 16th Century England. Since then, the number of differing groups considered as subcultures has exploded to encompass groups as diverse as dance music fans (Thornton 1995); graffiti artists (Macdonald 2005); tattoo enthusiasts (Atkinson 2005); skydivers (Celsi et al 1993) and punk music fans (Laing 2005). Subcultures are spaces and populations that operate on different social rules (norms) from the rest of us and incorporate style and presentation into their differentiation.

Early work on subcultures focused on the idea of deviance, and in particular criminality, identifying deviant subcultures as being criminogenic. Cohen's (2005) 1955 general theory of subculture frames

human action as attempts to solve varying problems. Subcultures arise gradually as groups of people try to resolve tensions around their own status in mainstream culture by seeking to collectively define new criteria to help establish status, building new norms in the process. This process is self-reinforcing, cleaving to a new set of norms results in rising status within the deviant group but at the cost of lower status in the societal mainstream. As those in the new subculture become increasingly ostracised from mainstream culture they begin to devalue it further, questioning its validity and the value of its judgement. This general framework was combined with the idea of social strain to produce a framework of delinquency which saw subcultures forming as a response to individuals being 'blocked' (unable to progress) at the cultural level within mainstream cultures (Cottee 2011: 735). Criminality did not arise from direct material need but more from norms engrained in some segments of society that viewed themselves as unable to prosper when playing by mainstream rules.

An alternative, and more politicised and style-heavy, interpretation of subculture emerged from a group of researchers commonly referred to as the Birmingham School in the 1980s. Rather than a source of criminal deviance, subcultures were interpreted as a form of proto-political resistance. Inherent in the Birmingham School was the greater attention paid to the expressive aspects of youth subcultures (Clarke et al 2006: 4; Hebdige 1979). Rather than just delinquent, youth subcultures were stylistically vibrant, and style itself was taken as an expression of politics. Cultures were intermixed with social class and ordered in patterns of domination and subordination (Clarke et al 2006: 5). Youth subcultures, for the Birmingham School, are ill-fated attempts by young people to resist hegemony and domination which is seen as inherent in the emergence of a growing middle class in Britain ("embourgeoisement") (Clarke et al 2006). One key theory which played a role is that of bricolage; the idea that those within subcultures were able to take the common components of everyday mass culture and reappropriate them into new signs and meanings in

resistance to domination (Clarke 2006: 149; see also: Miller-Idriss 2019).

A third broad school of thought on subcultures emerged partly as a reaction to the Birmingham School's politicisation of subcultures and the concept of resistance and subversion though stylistic interpretation. The dichotomy between the mainstream and subculture was seen as being a function of researchers' own eagerness to denigrate the mainstream and overlooked the increasingly fluid boundaries between the mainstream and subculture (Thornton 1995: 96-97).

Within subcultures however, the (often imagined) mainstream served a crucial role as a social marker, identifying everything participants believed they were against and providing them with a sense of their own values and the ability to make value judgements about others (Thornton 1995: 99). This did not completely escape earlier logics of status frustration, but this was deflected from the more strident resistance to a softer rejection of adult responsibility.

Investing in what Thornton identified as subcultural capital allowed participants to avoid being fixed socially and defer "social ageing" (Thornton 1995: 102). Rather than being a source of criminality or inherently socially progressive, Thornton identified subcultures as being more closely connected with asserting difference and allowing for discrimination and distinction (1995: 166). Subcultures allowed participants to play at politics, appropriating various political statements and messages, into what was essentially a form of self-expression designed to mark themselves out as distinct and independent of the mainstream rather than a political movement in waiting.

The idea of a subculture has since fallen out of favour. Researchers have interpreted it as being too rigid and totalising, suggesting that participation in subculture is an all or nothing prospect for young people when

the realities are that many of those who are embedded in subcultures are part-timers, able to switch between norms and values as needed. Subcultures have since been replaced by concepts like Neo-tribes that seek to reflect a more fluid approach to subcultural participation (Bennett 1999). For the purposes of terrorism and extremism studies however, and for the purposes of this guide, the concept of a subculture retains its value. The next section develops the idea of a subculture in terrorism studies in more depth.

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## SUBCULTURE AND TERRORISM

Subcultural theory, perhaps unsurprisingly given its overlap with criminology, has developed its own select following within terrorism studies. This has bifurcated slightly into two main pre-occupations: radicalisation and style.

Mark Hamm's (2004) work on the US skinhead scene used subcultural theory explicitly to try and explain radicalisation within the US skinhead tradition as well as applying this approach to more specific case studies (such as the neo-Nazi bank robbers the Aryan Republican Army). Taking his cue directly from Hebdige's work and the Birmingham school, Hamm developed his own theory of terrorist subcultures based on a wide array of US data which included ethnographic work. Hamm argued that US skinheads usually came from "working-class families" and that the skinheads conformed to the dominant ideology focused on the achievement of economic ideological goals. They set themselves attainable goals, and while some but not all suffered from various humiliations and strains, the common unifying factor was exposure to ideology, style, and in particular the white power music scene.

Far from being anomic and normless, Hamm presented his skinheads as being "synanomic" meaning that they were "hyperactively bonded to the dominant social order, especially to images of nationalism and

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militarism, and to one another” (Hamm 2004: 327).<sup>9</sup> This implicit criticism of the dominant cultural order as somehow enabling extremism is consistent with the social critique running through the work of the Birmingham school. It has also been a tempting target for other researchers who have claimed that extremism is tangentially consistent with, instead of an inversion of, dominant cultures (see: Cottee 2020 and below).

Cottee’s (2011) contribution focused on explaining the growth of third wave jihadists originating in Europe. Drawing heavily on the work of Marc Sageman and Edwin Bakker, Cottee sought to explain the proliferation of westernised jihadists that organised spontaneously outside the confines of formal leadership. To do so Cottee (in slight contrast to Hamm) reached back to early criminological work centred on subcultures, specifically Cohen’s 1955 work *Delinquent Boys*. Cohen noted that much of the crime in inner cities was driven not by instrumental need but by malevolence. This negativistic quality Cohen attributed to the formation of delinquent subcultures; subcultures within an overriding dominant mainstream culture. Cohen argued that delinquent subcultures arose in response to problems faced by specific societal groups, in the case of lower-class boys he attributed this to status frustration and humiliation at the hands of schools that defined them as failures. Formation of a delinquent subculture allowed these boys to develop their own status criteria that was more easily achieved and justify their desire to strike back at the mainstream culture that had humiliated them (Cohen 1955, cited in Cottee 2020: 737).

This theory helped to explain several of Cohen’s observations, including the joy taken by his subjects in offending others and breaking taboos for the sake of it: inverting the values of the mainstream. Cottee describes Cohen’s work as losing favour as more rational and instrumental approaches to criminology took centre stage in the 1970s, but then finding favour

again with those seeking to push back against this tendency and to refocus on culture and emotion (Cottee 2011: 737). Cottee then reconnected Cohen’s analysis with European jihadists, arguing that a range of factors led to status frustration and identity confusion. Third wave jihadism then became a potential solution, allowing these deeply alienated men and women a collective solution to their frustration. In other words, they sought to re-write the rules about who they were and what they should value.

Pisoiu’s (2014) analysis of subcultural theory as an explanation for Jihadist and right-wing radicalisation argued that the usefulness of subculture lay in its meso-level approach to radicalisation, between both individual level need (micro) and top-level structures (macro). The subcultural level added context to radicalisation:

**“Individual radicalization processes do not occur in a vacuum, but are embedded in particular social and cultural environments.”**

**(Pisoiu 2014: 10)**

Drawing on both Cottee and Hamm’s work, as well as the considerable existing literature, Pisoiu went on to clarify two broad theories of subculture and codify the potential roles of subcultural theory in radicalisation. She identified two traditions in analysing subculture. The American tradition which centred on deviant norms and values, while the later British tradition emphasised the role of style, meaning, rituals, dress, argot and music (Pisoiu 2014: 11). Both American and British traditions assumed subcultures arose out of disadvantaged populations who, for structural reasons, were unable to access mainstream (middle-class) resources or achieve mainstream goals (Pisoiu 2014: 12). For the American tradition middle class goals were considered inherent as part of the dominant

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<sup>9</sup> This finding may illustrate to some extent the ideological evolution of Siege and American Futurism. While nationalism and authoritarianism were generally seen as fundamental to the extreme-right it is not clear if these norms have survived the evolution to Siege Culture which seems to eschew patriotism and instead claims legitimacy from a more nebulous state of nature and fundamental truth which seemingly leaves little space for the state or feelings of nationalism.



culture. In contrast the British tradition, influenced by neo-Marxism, interpreted middle class cultural domination as being more problematic: “an exercise in hegemonic power relationships” (Pisoiu 2014: 12).

This split in thinking gave rise to two theories. For the American tradition, structural limitations led to status frustration as those trapped within the working class were denied the opportunity to attain success defined by the middle class. Subcultures provided an alternative set of norms and goals to strive for, ones that were more attainable than middle class ones. For the British tradition, subculture became a form of political resistance to the cultural domination of the middle class and a vehicle by which to culturally interrupt the mainstream.

Having identified these two interpretations, Pisoiu went on to test them through the lens of right-wing and jihadist extremists. She found no evidence in either case of barriers to education or being from a low-income family (Pisoiu 2014: 15). There was limited evidence for status frustration as a driver of radicalisation, but there was greater support for the idea of subcultures as providing alternative opportunity structures, and resistance to the ‘mainstream’. Overall, Pisoiu acknowledged the limitations of her study’s sample size and highlighted the continued importance of individual psychology in explaining radicalisation (2014: 21). She also noted that her findings meant that we should be cautious on making socio-economic assumptions about those involved in extremist subcultures; seeking status within an alternative subculture may not always be a reaction to a lack of status outside of it.

Radicalisation, or the entry into extremist subcultures, is the principle focus of this work. However, there are also hints that extremist subcultures are more than simply another factor to be considered in radicalisation and several researchers reflect more of the post-Birmingham tradition described above which distances itself from criminogenic and political interpretations of subculture to focus more on their stylistic appeal. Hemmingsen (2015) collected data

from observation and interaction with a cast of characters that emerged around a series of terrorism trials in Denmark. Hemmingsen pitched her study as focusing not on radicalisation but the wider social milieu inhabited by her informants.

Hemmingsen did not outright reject radicalisation but instead offered a broader perspective to go alongside the established approach to radicalisation journeys, arguing that jihadism was more than a political religious project, but also constituted a social phenomenon: understanding this broader “social context” was an “important piece of the puzzle” (2015: 3). Rather than just focusing on push factors - Cottee’s (2011) strains - Hemmingsen argued that an understanding of some of the attractions of Jihadism was also necessary (2015: 4). Theoretically, Hemmingsen presented this as being a combined counterculture and cultic milieu (2015: 6-7; for more on the cultic milieu see: Campbell 2002). The cultic milieu was used as a shorthand for the cultural underground of a society which was defined as the group of people who shared the belief that the “status-quo is not optimal” (Hemmingsen 2015: 7):

**“It is, in other words, a mosaic of individuals who do not (wish to) see themselves in the mainstream and who are in search of something which can be justified as an alternative...”**

**(Hemmingsen 2015: 7)**

Counterculture in turn was characterised by a deep distrust of parents, a search for new role models, and a rejection of authority (Hemmingsen 2015: 7). In the Danish jihadist scene Hemmingsen identified a social environment of societal misfits and malcontents who were free to come together in a coherent counterculture. Crucially, Hemmingsen argued that this was as much a culture composed of dress codes, norms, language and narrative, as it was a distinct religious or political project (Hemmingsen 2015: 8).

Another take on terrorism and subcultural style comes again from Simon Cottee (2020) who

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focuses on an analysis of values expressed within Jihadism. Cottee argues that while it is convenient for both the Jihadists of ISIS and those in the West to present themselves as being culturally opposed to the mainstream, the commonalities and overlaps are actually considerable. Jihadist values around self-sacrificing violence, machismo, and rejection of material goods can all be found within Western cultures as “subterranean values”.

Drawing on earlier criminological theory Cottee draws out the connections between the values embedded in jihadist subculture and values that many in the West would recognise as desirable, although they may not readily admit to it (Cottee 2020:773). In closing, Cottee notes two consequences, firstly that radicalisation into subcultures (but not necessarily violence) may not be as mysterious as is often presented, largely because the values espoused may also be present within mainstream culture. A second point Cottee makes is the performative nature of the western jihadi subculture and its close overlaps with existing subcultures despite its political pretensions:

**“...perhaps western jihadi subculture, far from being an effort to revive History, is simply a vehicle for nostalgic, apolitical cosplay designed to manufacture excitement for bored and sated western youths.”**

(Cottee 2020: 775)

While this take is difficult to reconcile with the many thousands of deaths and untold misery inflicted by IS and its supporters, it also recognises that support for IS came in many forms, and that much of it was limited to social media supporters cheering on IS from the digital side lines, seemingly revelling in the gore and atrocity as well as the global revulsion that accompanied it. Siege Culture has not had anything like the impact of IS, but a similar dynamic to that identified by Cottee (2020) may be playing out in a smaller scale. If anything, the ultimate aims of Siege Culture are so

remote and undefined, and the risks of being called on to actually do anything so minimal, that supporters may be even more secure in their “cosplay”. This does not remove the ever-concerning presence of violent action, however ill-conceived and likely to fail, but it may explain in part why Siege Culture was so inert: far from sinking the boat, Siege Culture protagonists were actually pretty content with the status quo.

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## SUMMARY

Overall, subcultural theory, and subcultures, have a small and uncertain place in the study of terrorism and extremism. As might be expected from the current policy and research landscape, the priority has undoubtedly been on explaining radicalisation, still a dominant concern in terrorism studies. Subcultural theory was valued for what it had to say about the processes of individuals adopting radical beliefs and violent behaviours (Hamm 2004; Cottee 2011; PISOIU 2014). As might also be expected, these have not proved to be ‘silver bullets’ for explaining radicalisation. Yes, subcultures offer alternative norms and modes of resistance towards dominant culture; but they cannot tell us why some of these things appeal to some people and not others. This requires a more developed and holistic understanding of an individual and their circumstances (PISOIU 2014).

Putting this into context is Hemmingsen’s (2015) argument that extremism (specifically Jihadism) does not simply involve rational political projects or violent plots, but also social contexts that people value and find meaning in. The appeal of these spaces can be understood as a component of radicalisation without needing to address it fully or be dominated by security questions. This depoliticising tendency is also consistent with work focused on non-extremist subcultures which has both questioned the political interpretation of subcultural resistance (Thornton 1995) and highlighted that subcultural participation may be life defining for some while others only dabble.

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# CONCLUSIONS: SIEGE CULTURE AS A SUBCULTURE

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The previous section gave an overview of Siege Culture. Although Siege Culture is both fluidly organised and hard to connect to specific geographies, the account attempted to focus on Siege Culture in the UK roughly between 2013 and 2021. One observation was that analysis of Siege Culture tended to focus on groups, radicalisation, and the threat of violence, including terrorism. Conversely, there was less discussion of beliefs, style, and cultural practices. This section laid the groundwork for correcting this oversight by suggesting that it can be beneficial to explore Siege Culture as a subcultural phenomenon rather than just a security threat.

Approaching Siege Culture in this way draws on an established thread already present within terrorism studies which is in itself a product of the rich and varied history of subcultural research outside this field. Researchers have previously analysed terrorist groups and milieus as subcultures, using established theoretical frameworks drawn from criminology and sociology to look at questions of radicalisation as well as internal dynamics, structures and meanings. Research has revolved around “why join” as opposed to “how do they work” type questions when both are necessary for a fuller understanding of extremism.

Drawing on explanations such as strain theory and status frustration, researchers have suggested that extremist subcultures may emerge as a result of structural factors and participants’ attempts to solve collective problems, either by establishing new norms or resisting the imposition of norms from the mainstream. This reflects terrorism studies’ traditional interest in ‘push’ factors: the things that drive potential recruits down radicalising pathways. Less developed, but likely as influential in the context of Siege Culture, is the potential draw of

Siege Subculture: ‘pull factors’ (Hemmingsen 2015). Making a similar point almost 20 years ago Hamm argued that focusing on these kinds of details returned a human dimension to our understanding of terrorism, linking violent behaviours to “cultural and political processes” (Hamm 2004: 337).

Turing back to Siege Culture specifically, this puts us in an uncomfortable position. Much of Siege Culture is hard to engage with and reflects beliefs and values which the majority of us find hateful. However, only when we realise that, as with other subcultures, much of the attraction within Siege Culture comes from the deliberate inversion of mainstream liberal norms do we see where the appeal may come from. Too extreme even for many neo-Nazis, Siege Culture was the dark fringe of the extreme-right, populated only by those who were seeking to reject the basic norms of liberal democratic societies and revelled in the ability to break deeply held taboos around race, religion, politics, and ethics. Viewed in Thornton’s (1995) terms as a quest for distinction Siege Culture, was for a time, as far as someone could go to differentiate themselves from the societal mainstream. Siege Culture is calculated to offend and therein lies a large part of its appeal.

Coupled with its extreme and overt rejection of mainstream social norms and values there are several further overlaps between Siege Culture and the wider understanding of subculture. Firstly, that Siege Culture has been primarily associated with younger people, examples being the relative youth of members and National Action’s explicit focus on the under 30s. Secondly, the important role of style and presentation in the space, including National Action’s preoccupation with presentation and the importance of creative roles such as Dark Foreigner. Thirdly, and finally, the overall organisation of the space,

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composed of a complex network of formal groups, influencers, and individual actors, lends itself to the inherent fluidity of subcultures.

Applying a subcultural perspective to Siege Culture is useful for several reasons:

- First and foremost, subculture is conceptually loose enough to encompass the groups and terrorist actors so often the focus of analysis, whilst also locating their participation within a broader subculture composed of shared values and beliefs; aspects which are often overlooked. Rather than starting with the most dangerous or threatening behaviours and working backwards, the idea of a subculture offers a more holistic perspective encompassing a broader range of unaffiliated actors.
- Secondly subculture provides an opportunity to think about and take seriously the stylistic elements and internal meanings and processes of Siege Culture. Our interest in Siege Culture cannot end when an individual decides to become involved. What participants do, how they do it, and what participation means to them all matter in understanding the risks arising from Siege Culture. This is not to say that the strategic objectives of Siege Culture should not be a concern, only that Siege Culture participants have consciously presented themselves differently from others in the extreme-right. Style and performance are key considerations within Siege Culture that often lose out to the (understandable) focus on strategy and accounts of radicalisation.
- Thirdly, and finally, subculture is less totalising. Where battlefield jihadists at one point came to have the support of an entire proto state in the form of IS, the extreme-right has nothing like the same ideological centre of gravity or level of commitment. Aside from a few small-

scale projects, there is not equivalent to the Caliphate in the extreme-right.<sup>10</sup> Rather than full-time battlefield roles supporters of Siege Culture can only wage (mostly online) war in the gaps between other commitments including work, school, and family. Likewise, they are not ideologically bound to Siege Culture, they are free to adapt their ideas, join a new audience, or simply walk away at any point.

In conclusion, the idea of analysing the widely acknowledged security threat Siege Culture is deemed to represent with the same tools that are commonly applied to youth cultures and fandoms may seem incongruous. However, beneath the conscientiously militant exterior, Siege Culture bears more than a striking resemblance to other ‘edgy’ online subcultures.

This report is designed to provide a baseline for further research, first by outlining the nebulous and messy space that is Siege Culture, and second by making the case that Siege Culture was both a violent revolutionary movement and a youth subculture. Having set this out, the next report will build on these arguments to make the case that participation in Siege Culture was not monolithic but differentiated; participants could take on multiple roles within the subculture. A further report will explore how these roles may help interpret the comparative lack of violence that emerged from this space.

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<sup>10</sup> Examples of separatist communities with ties to extremism or extremists include Elohim City (ADL 2012) and the Aryan Nations compound at Hayden Lake (ABC News 2000)

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