



Historical Context and the Good Lives Model

FULL REPORT

APRIL 2024

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This CREST report is informed by a review of research on protective factors set out in an earlier report. You can find all the outputs from this project at: www.crestresearch.ac.uk/projects/constraining-violence/

The research for the report was supported by the Center for Research on Extremism (C-REX). C-REX is a cross-disciplinary centre for the study of right-wing extremism, hate crime and political violence at the University of Oslo, and the Handa Centre for the Study of Terrorism and Political Violence at the University of St Andrews.



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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

This report describes the findings of research based on a qualitative analysis of the life histories of four German, former right-wing extremists. It uses the Good Lives Model (GLM) as a framework for interpreting their journeys into and out of extremism and considers the implications for policy and practice.

The findings suggest that developing rehabilitation strategies for right-wing extremists which draw on strengths-based approaches, such as the GLM, has promise as it helps to understand which primary needs are fulfilled by right-wing extremist ideology and contexts, and therefore can provide insight into where to target rehabilitation strategies at an individual level. However, individual-level analysis only is insufficient. It is also important to consider the social and historical context an individual is embedded in, and the opportunities and barriers that context provides to fulfil goods in normative or counter-normative ways.

In certain socio-historical periods, national and local contexts, and/ or organisational settings, there can be explicit or tacit support for right-wing ideology. The life stories analysed for this report were rooted in experiences in Germany in the 1990s. During this period, the so-called 'Baseball Bat Years' because of the scale of neo-Nazi violence, right-wing extremism

was often trivialised and attracted relatively modest sanctions. In this context, engaging in right-wing activities could be understood as being in line with wider norms, reinforcing extremist aspirations by providing easy access to somewhat socially acceptable, if harmful routes to achieving goods and fulfilling individual needs.

The analysis demonstrates how the GLM helps interpret how individuals can meet needs and fulfil goods in maladaptive and anti-social ways. The findings also illustrate the importance of considering the normative contexts people are embedded in when developing intervention or reintegration strategies. If individuals are situated in, or returned to, right-wing supportive contexts, the opportunities for them to pursue non-harmful routes to achieving goods are reduced.

These issues also highlight the importance of recognising the dynamic nature of norms, and the way shifting societal and political perspectives on what is 'extreme', or acceptable forms of political expression, shape the contexts within which assessments of risk; analyses of trajectories through extremism; and intervention planning are developed.

THE GOOD LIVES MODEL AND EXTREMIST TRAJECTORIES

This report contributes to the *Constraining Violence* project through an analysis of three German language autobiographies and one biography of former right-wing extremists. It applies the Good Lives Model (GLM) to the trajectories of past terrorist offenders to help understand the potential of strengths-based approaches – of which the GLM is the clearest example – to inform rehabilitation policy and practice. Initially developed for work with sexual offenders, but increasingly used in desistance research on terrorist offenders (Marsden 2017; Dean 2014), the GLM differs from risk-based approaches because of its emphasis on developing the individual's strengths to help them move away from harmful behaviour, rather than concentrating on assessing and managing individual risks.

The GLM is based on the idea that a fulfilled life prevents delinquency and, conversely, that delinquency can be explained by the inadequate or unbalanced fulfilment of primary needs (Purvis, Ward, and Willis 2015; Mallion, Wood and Mallion 2020). These assumptions underpin rehabilitative approaches that aim to reduce the risk of reoffending by promoting opportunities for individuals to fulfil their primary needs. This approach is proving to be particularly promising in helping to interpret trajectories into and out of right-wing extremism (Paalgard Munden et al., 2023), and informs some aspects of existing intervention practice (Dean, 2014).

The primary goods set out in the GLM propose that individuals strive to achieve healthy living; knowledge in areas that interest them; seek mastery through work or leisure activities; desire agency over their actions; freedom from emotional stress (described as inner peace); meaningful relationships, and a sense of community. The GLM further assumes that individuals

strive for meaning in life through (broadly defined) routes to spirituality, and are motivated to achieve pleasure, and creativity (Ward and Brown, 2004; Ward and Marshall, 2004; Purvis, 2010).

Internal and external barriers get in the way of individuals achieving primary needs or goods in pro-social, sustainable ways. These barriers mean that anti-social, illegal or violent ways of meeting needs can be found through activities which are described as 'secondary goods' (cf. Ward and Stewart 2003). Barriers can have direct or indirect effects on producing harmful or delinquent behaviour (Mallion, Wood and Mallion, 2020) and come in four forms:

1. **Inappropriate means:** using harmful or illegal routes to achieving goods.
2. **Coherence:** where goods come into conflict with one other.
3. **Scope:** when certain goods become pre-eminent, and others are neglected.
4. **Capacity:** a lack of internal or external capacity (the focus of this report) to meet primary goods. Internal capacity might include an individual's cognitive, psychological, or behavioural limitations. Lack of external capacity refers to an individual's context which helps determine the conditions and opportunities for primary needs to be met (Mallion, Wood and Mallion 2020).

The research set out in this report uses the GLM to analyse four life histories mostly from 1990s Germany. In doing so, it demonstrates the importance of remaining sensitive to historical context and the way it shapes the kinds of external barriers that get in the way of achieving a fulfilled life without resorting to violence.

THE GOOD LIVES MODEL AND EXTREMIST TRAJECTORIES

Historical Context and the Good Lives Model

By highlighting how internal and external barriers can shape the process of engaging in right-wing extremist violence, it underlines the need for reintegration strategies to take account of social contexts when planning interventions. Conceptually, the analysis demonstrates that examining the trajectories of former right-wing extremists can help interpret which primary needs are left unmet or fulfilled by turning to extreme-right ideology and action.

CONTEXT SENSITIVITY WHEN USING THE GLM

External barriers to fulfilling primary needs are not only factors that *prevent* an individual from pro-social, normative achievement of goods. External factors can also make non-normative, anti-social fulfilment of primary needs appear *more attractive*, or even seem normative. The four German case studies analysed for this research demonstrate that the reasons for this are often linked to the historical and/ or socio-political context the individual is embedded in. Using the GLM to understand past right-wing extremist trajectories to draw lessons for contemporary rehabilitation strategies therefore needs an understanding of the historical context if it is to inform GLM-based interventions.

Analysis of the life histories of former right-wing extremists active in Germany during the 1990s highlights a number of contexts which afforded opportunities for right-wing extremism to develop, including within state-affiliated institutions such as the Bundeswehr (German armed forces), the courts, and prisons. In these contexts, the state did not exercise a preventive or corrective influence on individuals, largely failing to acknowledge or sanction right-wing extremist aspirations.

The trivialisation of right-wing extremism in the German armed forces, courts, and prisons, is a common thread running through the autobiographies, and points to the favourable opportunity structure right-wing extremists encountered in some state institutions. These can be understood as a kind of ‘barrier’ in

the sense of the GLM, as they make it harder for the individual to opt for pro-social routes to achieving goods. First, because harmful routes to fulfilling goods are more accessible than pro-social ones, and because the individual has fewer opportunities to learn that these routes to achieving goods are non-normative. In addition to institutional contexts, wider political dynamics can also play a role and should be considered in the GLM. This is exemplified by the case of Odfried Hepp, a man committed to right-wing ideas, but who was also employed as an agent by the Ministry for State Security (Stasi) of the GDR which provided him with a unique opportunity structure to fulfil his personal and political goals.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on a qualitative content analysis of three autobiographies of former right-wing extremists, Manuel Bauer, Christian Weißgerber and Stefan Bar, and complemented by an assessment of Odfried Hepp’s biography written by Yury Winterberg. The analysis forms part of the study ‘Good Lives in Right-Wing Extremist Autobiographies’ (Paalgard Munden et al. 2023), in which a further 14 extremist life histories from countries of the Global North were analysed in addition to the four German ones used here (see box below).

All sources were coded in several iterative loops according to primary goods, secondary goods and barriers. The motivation for a more in-depth qualitative investigation of institutional and political contextual factors arose from the observation that the German autobiographies stood out from the others because of the nature of the contextual opportunity structures these individuals faced.

Before using the German autobiographies to show how the non-sanctioning and trivialisation of right-wing extremist behaviour may give rise to impressions of normativity and impunity, the historical context in Germany in the 1980s and 1990s is briefly introduced. The original text was translated from German by the author.

Case Studies

Manuel Bauer was part of the East German neo-Nazi scene from a young age. He founded a paramilitary group through which he planned xenophobic attacks. Around 2002, he left the neo-Nazi scene with the help of counsellors from the exit initiative EXIT Germany. Bauer is a member of the EXIT Germany action group, founded in 2008, and now uses his experience to work against right-wing extremism.

Stefan Michael Bar publicly declared his exit from the right-wing extremist scene on public television in 2001. Prior to that, he had been a neo-Nazi since his youth and co-founder of an extreme right-wing terrorist organisation.

Christian Weißgerber entered the Nazi scene in the East German working-class milieu during his youth. In 2010, he left and has since been actively involved in educational work and initiatives to prevent and counter violent extremism (P/CVE).

Odfried Hepp founded his first right-wing extremist group at the age of 19. After his disillusioned return from the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffmann training camp in Lebanon, he founded the Hepp-Kexel-Group and carried out several bank robberies and bombings. In 1982, he became one of the most important operational sources of intelligence for the Stasi. After his arrest, Hepp was extradited to the Federal Republic of German (FRG) and reintegrated into society upon his release in 1993.

RIGHT-WING EXTREMISM IN THE 1980S AND THE BASEBALL BAT YEARS

The three former right-wing extremists whose autobiographies form the basis of this analysis - Manuel Bauer, Christian Weißgerber and Stefan Bar - were active in Germany during the 1990s. The 'Baseball Bat Years' have become short-hand for this period which was characterised by a 'broad wave of right-wing (everyday) violence' (Virchow 2022, 10). At that time, Odfried Hepp - the fourth case analysed in the research - was beginning his reintegration into society. He was active in the 1970s and 1980s, during the Cold War when Germany was divided between the Western Bloc, led by the US, and the Eastern Bloc, ruled by the USSR.

The 1960s marked the first visible resurgence of right-wing extremism in Germany in the post-war period. However, right-wing extremism only became characterised by xenophobia in the following decade and was mainly directed against guest workers. In the 1980s, the popularity of politicised skinhead scenes in both East and West Germany increased (Virchow 2022). At the same time, the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG) was affected by right-wing terrorist groups. One of these, was the Hepp-Kexel group, whose founding member Odfried Hepp, was mainly motivated by anti-Americanism.

This anti-Americanism was a central component of the ideology of the German Democratic Republic (GDR), which was also concerned about right-wing extremist attacks. The extent to which right-wing extremist subcultures found a fertile context in the GDR remains unclear. However, research is increasingly suggesting that the Ministry for State Security cultivated an 'instrumental relationship' with German right-wing extremists (Salzborn 2016).

After the fall of the Berlin wall, the 'Baseball Bat Years' were characterised by a significant increase in right-wing extremist violence, primarily motivated by racism and efforts to exert right-wing territorial control (Virchow 2022, 14). 1991-2 marked the tragic peak of this 'xenophobic wave of violence' (Backes 2013, 373). According to Steuwer and Kössler (2022, 15-16), 'in 1991, the number of property damage, bodily harm and arson attacks alone had almost quintupled to nearly 1500 incidents'.

The state's reaction to this right-wing extremist violence was strongly criticised, both at the time and today. In 1991, protesters in numerous German cities spoke out against xenophobia and racism, accusing the state of failing to respond adequately. Instead of treating this violence as a product of the newly unified Germany and addressing its causes, the problem was blamed on experiences of precariousness and disorientation in East Germany and thus depoliticised. The inadequate state response to the right-wing extremist violence that gripped the newly united Germany also manifested in a lack of criminal sanctions. The explanation for which can be found in the opportunity structures during this period which have been described as 'contribut[ing] significantly to the self-confidence of more extreme right-wing milieus in the 1990s' (Virchow 2022, 14).

OPPORTUNITY STRUCTURES AS BARRIERS IN THE GLM

In what follows, the report focuses on two German institutional contexts, namely the German Armed Forces and the criminal justice system, drawing on the statements of former right-wing extremists to demonstrate how right-wing extremist behaviour and attitudes were barely sanctioned and, in some cases, perceived as socially desirable. This opens opportunity structures for the individuals, constituting barriers to achieving primary goods in non-harmful, pro-social ways. The case of Odfried Hepp demonstrates something similar, illustrating that as well as institutional contexts, the wider political dynamics in which a right-wing extremist individual's history is embedded need to be accounted for when applying the GLM.

GERMAN ARMED FORCES

When a superior in the German armed forces discovered Christian Weißgerber's bathing towel in the colours of Prussia, a common code in German right-wing extremist milieus, he commented that Weißgerber should have hung the towel in a more prominent position, as this would delight other officers (Weißgerber 2019, 152). This anecdote is not an isolated case. Weißgerber describes how anti-Semitic conspiracy theories were openly shared with other soldiers and their superiors (Ibid., 151) and how an officer regularly sang Nazi Germany army songs during drills (Ibid., 156). In a photo taken shortly after his (faked) vow to serve the German state, Weißgerber is pictured next to a peer who was a well-known member of a forbidden right-wing party in his city. Weißgerber believed the German intelligence services 'must have known about this', but it would have been 'no reason against (his) service' in the German armed forces.

His experiences, he explains, had 'goosebump potential' (Ibid., 156). The opportunity to share conspiracy theories with superiors reassured him that he 'might soon join their ranks' (Ibid., 152). The fact that the German armed forces, part of the executive power of the state, did not curb his activities and that he found like-minded people, both peers and superiors, constantly reaffirmed his belief system and conviction that a 'silent march through the institutions' was possible.

When Weißgerber was sanctioned for his actions, this was only through internal disciplinary action and carried no consequences, while the public prosecutor saw no reason for criminal charges 'due to the lack of seriousness of the offence and the lack of evidence' (Ibid., 156). Instead, Weißgerber, who saw his idea of becoming a 'wolf in sheep's clothing' materialise, continued training at the gun.

Christian Weißgerber joins a long line of right-wing extremists and terrorists who have found temporary shelter in the German armed forces. The most prominent example from the 1970s and 1980s was Michael Kühnen - a lieutenant in the army who was ultimately dismissed for circulating Nazi propaganda. Uwe Mundlos and André Eminger from the National Socialist Underground (NSU) also joined the armed forces, just like Franco A., an officer arrested in February 2017 for planning a terrorist attack.

However, the Weißgerber case exemplifies how right-wing extremist behaviour in an institution like the German armed forces remained largely unchecked, attracting limited sanction, and in some contexts, was even fostered in the 1990s. Weißgerber faced no meaningful restrictions to his behaviour, and the normative context did little to indicate that the means by which he was fulfilling his primary needs, including

pleasure through a desire for adventure, and a sense of community, were inappropriate.

CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM

When the right-wing extremist Odfried Hepp was arrested in Lebanon after escaping from the Wehrsportgruppe Hoffman, a right-wing terrorist organisation, he was only tried for five of the 29 charges, and ‘the formation of a terrorist organisation, which Hepp was initially accused of, had already turned into nothing more than a criminal organisation before the start of the trial’ (Winterberg 2004, 131). Ultimately, he only received a sentence of 16 months despite making a dramatic statement at the beginning of the trial rejecting the court’s legitimacy.

This formers’ life history accounts reflect a disbelief about the leniency of court sentences and the ‘farcical events’ (Bauer 2012, 49) that surround their treatment by the state. Opportunities for the state to halt or sanction right-wing extremist attitudes and actions went unused. In the case of the criminal justice system, right-wing extremists developed the impression they were largely invulnerable and could act with impunity.

The formers’ accounts report ‘naïve’ decisions, such as the unjustified waiving of pre-trial detention. Their treatment gave signals to the right-wing scene which came to learn which judges were more lenient (Bauer 2012, 131). Modest sentences meant the criminal justice system was seen to be without the will or the power to enforce stronger sanctions. It was also not uncommon that sentences brought the offender into contact with other right-wing extremists. This was the case both with Manuel Bauer and Stefan Bar, who was sent to a youth home after his sentence, where he not only met like-minded people but also experienced a lack of sanction. According to his account, nobody seemed irritated about the Prussian flag hanging or right-wing extremist music playing in the institution (Bar 2003).

However, not all sentences favoured right-wing extremists, and the extent to which sentences against

right-wing extremists were and continue to be too lenient is debated. Nevertheless, there was a sense within the right-wing scene ‘that it can do as it pleases without having to fear serious consequences’ (Ayyadi 2021). The discrepancy between the sentences given to right-wing extremists also fuelled resentment towards the state. For example, Bar’s discontent with a comrade who, thanks to a ‘deal’ with the judiciary, only received a two-year suspended sentence, compared to Bar’s much longer sentence was described as ‘hypocritical and confirmed my view of this state, [which] strengthened my attitude even more’ (Bar 2003, 117).

If a sentence was issued, the prison provided a different, and often accommodating context within which right-wing extremism could develop. This is aptly described by Winterberg, author of Hepp’s biography, commenting on Hepp secretly exchanging notes with another right-wing extremist in prison, which a guard tolerated: ‘Because Hepp is never disciplined for this, the guard’s message is: I sympathise with your ideas. It gives Odfried a good feeling. The comrades are everywhere – behind the bars and in front of them’. In the case of Stefan Bar, the correctional officers not only tolerated but actively supported his actions. When he advertised a right-wing extremist party in prison during the 1998 federal elections, one guard encouraged him, and another even asked for their election manifesto. Bar explains that there were ‘quite a few sympathisers’ among the guards (Bar 2003, 15) who also ‘made no secret of their attitudes’.

A DIFFERENT CONTEXT: ODFRIED HEPP AND THE DDR

Moving away from the ‘Baseball Bat Years’, to the years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, this historical context around a divided Germany is an example of how much political contextual dynamics affects the individual and their decisions to fulfil primary needs pro-socially or harmfully. In the case of Odfried Hepp, it is the GDR’s Ministry of State Security that, in a ‘perfect case study of realpolitik and how pragmatic

considerations trumped any ideological hesitations' (Blumenau 2020, 22, cf. Salzborn 2016), granted Hepp protection from the West German security authorities, enabling his extremism.

When the police in West Germany arrested members of the Hepp-Kexel group, Hepp spectacularly escaped from the investigators because he found refuge with the Stasi, where he had been a secret informer for a year, and was described as one of the Stasi's 'most valuable operational sources' (Winterberg 2004, 229). The Stasi were 'already so deeply involved in the case of the right-wing terrorist Hepp' (Winterberg 2004, 136) that 'a later extradition to the Federal Republic would be tantamount to a disaster' (Ibid.).

The fact that the Stasi protected a right-wing extremist appears deeply paradoxical. However, this could be understood as, on the one hand, a control measure for the Stasi, as they presumably wanted to be informed about plans for right-wing attacks against the GDR (cf. Salzborn 2016), and on the other, a means of serving the 'anti-imperialist struggle' (Winterberg 2004, 224). Prior to Hepp, the GDR had also failed to extradite the fugitive right-wing terrorist Udo Albrecht to the West German authorities.

In Hepp's case, however, the increasingly close, almost friendly, personal contacts with those in charge of him at the Stasi also played a role in explaining why he was protected, as do possible misjudgements by the Stasi regarding his ideological position. To what extent Hepp also had ideological overlaps with the communist regime remains unclear. He did not accept money for his espionage activities, something that could be explained if he shared some of the Stasi's ideological convictions (Winterberg 2004). Blumenau (2020), for example, states that 'little attention was paid to Hepp's neo-Nazi convictions'. The fact is that Hepp was able to plan a terrorist attack during his time with the Stasi and that life as an agent not only gave him personal security and impunity but also satisfied his needs for agency and power.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CONTEXT WHEN USING THE GLM MODEL

The four cases illustrate that ‘external barriers’, as understood by the GLM, can not only influence choices to engage in maladaptive behaviour by making normative routes to achieving goods harder to access. They can also make counter-normative ways of achieving goods appear more attractive because of the structural and historical context in which an individual is embedded. The former extremists that feature in this report describe how trivialisation, toleration or even the promotion of right-wing extremist thought or action – whether by right-wing extremists in state institutions or realpolitik calculations – can reinforce the belief that they have chosen the right path. The signals these individuals received was that right-wing extremist acts may go unpunished; it was possible to receive army training whilst expressing right-wing views; and that it was possible to meet like-minded people in the armed forces or prison.

These contexts can make turning away from extremist violence appear less attractive. The environment these individuals were in, provided perhaps more opportunities for primary needs to be fulfilled in harmful counter-normative ways, than through normative pro-social methods. In the cases discussed here, it was actually disappointment with the lack of support within the right-wing extremist milieu that contributed to their exit.

For the analysis of the trajectories of formers to develop strengths-based rehabilitative approaches, this means that special attention needs to be paid to the context in which individuals operate. Without recognising that ‘barriers’ can also present favourable opportunity structures, it becomes harder to understand why individuals might remain engaged in right-wing extremist spaces.

The German armed forces, for example, fulfilled Weißgerber’s primary needs, such as the desire for play or agency, and provided weapons training as a route to implementing his ideological objectives. He encountered a ‘barrier’ to fulfilling his needs outside of right-wing extremism because the appeal of this path was either not diminished or only slightly undermined by typically light sanctions. If none of his superiors had shared his convictions and he had been held accountable, his idea of a ‘silent march through the institutions’ would not have been confirmed, and other ways of fulfilling needs, such as play and agency, may have appeared more attractive. Similarly, the prison sentence might have affected Bar differently if correctional officers had not shared or expressed interest in his ideology.

Individuals who lack these permissive influences, who, for example, always have their actions punished by harsh rulings, cannot be compared so easily with individuals who experience more permissive opportunity structures. This makes it important to examine each case to understand how significant the barriers, and how strong the opportunity structures are, that influence the individual in their choice of secondary goods.

One would hope that someone who chooses to engage in an extreme right-wing milieu today would experience a less conducive context, and a rehabilitation strategy aimed at fulfilling primary needs might take hold more easily. Likewise, it is important to analyse the extent to which the GLM can also be applied to the understanding of left-wing, extremist or jihadist trajectories and where the differences, if any, lie between the conceptual application of the GLM to different forms of extremism.

SUMMARY & PRACTITIONER IMPLICATIONS

1. The GLM is a helpful framework for analysing former right-wing extremists' life histories.
2. Understanding which primary needs are lacking, and subsequently fulfilled by right-wing extremist ideology and milieus can help us understand someone's journey into right wing extremism. This can inform the design of rehabilitation strategies, which can be shaped around meeting those primary needs in pro-social ways.
3. However, these considerations should go beyond the individual-level analysis to consider the social and historical context in which the individual is embedded, as these contexts can provide explicit or implicit support for right-wing ideologies and therefore may help to predict the success, or otherwise, of specific rehabilitation strategies.

This report has illustrated this through the life histories of four former German right-wing extremists, and points to the institutional and political opportunity structures right-wing extremists faced in the 1980s and 1990s.

Formers who were active in right-wing extremist milieus or as individual offenders during the so-called

'baseball bat years', report on the trivialisation and limited sanctioning of right-wing extremist attitudes and behaviour in the German army, courtroom and prison system. During the Cold War, at least a decade earlier, political rivalries between the Western and Eastern blocs had already supported right-wing extremist individuals in real-political fashion.

These contexts suggested to right-wing extremists that their activities were somewhat normative, which encouraged them to continue pursuing primary goods through harmful maladaptive routes. Rehabilitative strategies would do well to recognise and take these contexts into account. On the one hand, the contextualisation of individual decisions in extremist life histories is necessary for a holistic understanding of the case. For some individuals, the context made it less attractive to fulfil primary goods pro-socially. This, in turn, has an impact on the willingness of individuals to leave right-wing extremist scenes and on what rehabilitative strategies might be more effective. On the other hand, rehabilitative approaches are also contextually and normatively embedded. Reflecting on the historical and contemporary dynamics of norms and what is considered 'extreme' is imperative when developing rehabilitative strategies for extremist offenders.

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The logo graphic consists of three concentric, semi-circular red arcs on the left side, partially overlapping a solid red circle. The word "CREST" is written in white, uppercase, sans-serif font across the middle of the red circle.

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