

Crusaders Past and Present: European Semiotics and the Radical Right

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In a Tortoiseshell: *In his Writing Seminar R3, Christian Maines puts the discourse we see today in the news regarding the Alt-right into historical context, letting his research guide his understanding of the group, rather than the other way around. His use of **structuring** elements—purposeful **orienting**, definitions of **key terms**, clear topic sentences, consistent tie back sentences—sets his argument up for success. **Motivating** his thesis from the beginning to the end, Christian is able to not only sustain his topic, but make an insightful contribution to our understanding of the Alt-right.*

Feature

Between Aug. 11th and 12th of 2017, crowds swarmed the streets of Charlottesville wearing plate armor, carrying torches, and calling out battle cries—chants of “You will not replace us!” and “Deus Vult!” echoed through the streets.¹ By sundown on the 13th, there was a memorial of flower wreaths on the ground for Heather Heyer, struck down by a car in the midst of the protests.² Coverage of the violence largely associated the protests with the “Alt-Right,” a loosely-defined collection of radical American nationalists with undertones of racism and extremism.³ Immense violence and tragedy came about in this single instance of conflict spurred on by the Alt-Right. However, in recent months, the consensus in news media has been that the movement is dead, as authors claim that the Alt-Right “has grown increasingly chaotic and fractured, torn apart by infighting and legal troubles,” and cite lawsuits and arrests, fundraising difficulties, tepid recruitment, counter protests, and banishment from social media platforms.⁴

¹ Staff, “Deconstructing the symbols and slogans spotted in Charlottesville,” accessed 14 April 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2017/local/charlottesville-videos/?utm_term=.370f3936a4be.

² Andrew Katz, “Unrest in Virginia: Clashes Over a Show of White Nationalism in Charlottesville Turn Deadly,” accessed 3 May 2018, <http://time.com/charlottesville-white-nationalist-rally-clashes/>.

³ Taylor Hosking, “The Rise of the Alt-Right: Selections from The Atlantic’s coverage of 2017, when the right-wing movement gained momentum,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/alt-right/549242/>.

⁴ Amanda Marcotte, “Alt-right is dying, but powerful conservatives are mainstreaming its ideas,” accessed 3 May 2018, <https://www.salon.com/2018/03/19/alt-right-is-dying-but-powerful-conservatives-are-mainstreaming-its-ideas/>.

Michael Edison Hayden, “Is the Alt-Right Dying? White Supremacist Leaders Report Infighting and Defection,” accessed 3 May 2018, <http://www.newsweek.com/alt-right-white-supremacist-movement-roiled-infighting-defection-and-arrests-831491>.

It may appear to the observer that the far right was brought into existence alongside the Trump presidency and disappears as troubles mount for America's mainstream political right. For example, a recent article was published in *The Guardian* titled "The alt-right is in decline. Has antifascist activism worked?" in which the author argues that "the white supremacist alt-right will not survive the Trump era as a coherent movement."⁵

The general argument within mainstream news media appears to be that Alt-Right activism is both unsophisticated and on the decline. I take the opposite position. There is substantial evidence to be found in recent current events as well as in internet data trends which reveals the continued importance of the Alt-Right. For example, musician Kanye West recently generated an immense amount of internet traffic from Alt-Right websites following his controversial claim that slavery was a "choice."⁶ Several minor celebrity figures within Alt-Right circles chimed in supporting West, including the former artist of the Dilbert comics, popular YouTuber Stefan Molyneux, and Turning Point USA founder Charlie Kirk, who uses his social media platforms to advocate right-wing ideology across college campuses.⁷ The media upswing in attention to the far right is mirrored by a realized uptick within internet data trends related to the Alt-Right.

In particular, useful tools for following the development of far-right politics include the historical markers for far-right extremism and how data metrics track their usage across internet platforms. There has been a marked resurgence in the public's interest in the Christian Crusades of the 11th-15th centuries, as displayed by search trends in keywords like "Deus Vult," the famous Christian battle cry. Google search trends reveal that this phrase was searched 2500% more frequently around October 8, 2016 than it was at the same time in the prior year, followed by a stabilization back to the mean [Graph 1].⁸ Meanwhile, the term *Völkisch*, referring to the Germanic occult theory of folkloric unity from the 1910s, underwent an even greater

Terrence McCoy, "Imploding': Financial troubles. Lawsuits. Trailer park brawls. Has the alt-right peaked?" accessed 3 May 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/social-issues/imploding-lawsuits-fundraising-troubles-trailer-park-brawls-has-the-alt-right-peaked/2018/04/20/0a2fb786-39a6-11e8-9c0a-85d477d9a226_story.html?utm_term=.5f95ce061f4d.

⁵ Jason Wilson, "The Alt-Right is in Decline," accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/mar/19/the-alt-right-is-in-decline-has-antifa-activism-worked>.

⁶ Kelly Weill, "Alt-Right Cheers Kanye West's 'Slavery Is a Choice' TMZ Rant," accessed 3 May 2018, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/alt-right-cheers-kanye-west-s-slavery-is-a-choice-tmz-rant>.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Google Trends Search: "Deus Vult," accessed 14 April 2018, <https://g.co/trends/MivQ4>.

increase over that same timespan [Graph 2].⁹ While the resurgence of Nazi theories of the supernatural and this growth of Crusader imagery in the popular psyche seem to be unrelated, they are in fact both deeply connected to the revival of European ethno-nationalist sentiment around the world in the last five years.¹⁰

When it comes to the question of whether occultism fits into the scope of modern ethno-nationalism, the answer from recent scholarship appears to be a resounding ‘yes.’¹¹ Moreover, the synthesis of Nazi occultism and Crusader ideology dates at least as far back as U.S. politician Ben Klassen’s articulation of “Racial Holy War,” which became the basis for an organic American right-wing movement, can be traced back even further.¹² The modern media pays significant attention to the Alt-Right and modern ethno-nationalists, but by and large portrays these cultures as spontaneous, new, and non-sophisticated phenomena, indeed a side-effect of the modern zeitgeist. Analyses of social media suggest evidence contradictory to this supposition, revealing a problematic incongruity. In this paper, I propose that the radical political right and its philosophy represent a strong continuation of a preexisting tradition of European militant mysticism which traces back to the early 20th century. Indeed, the symbolic and textual linkages between European militarism originating with the racialized elements of the Crusades and the race-oriented Germanic occult provide a direct origin point for the modern day trends of far-right ethno-nationalists. Using the theories of semiotic scholarship, I characterize the extreme right in Europe and the U.S. as a speech community. The historical persistence of these symbols and ideas within this speech community reveal a much greater degree of sophistication and historical memory than previously conceived. The unifying force in these related but distant concepts tends to be modern social media on internet platforms.

There are only a few ways to track the development of historical communities over time, and one of the most substantial is the examination of symbols. The historical continuity in question within this paper does essentially rely on symbols which cross boundaries of space, time, and language. Semiotics scholar Gunther Kress describes a unique term within the study of language and symbols termed a “speech community,” described to provide some explanation as to the heritability and differentiation of language and symbols in different regions. For the purposes of this argument, we can presume the right-wing fringes of the English-speaking world

⁹ Google Trends Search: “Völkisch,” accessed 14 April 2018, <https://g.co/trends/fuMfp>.

¹⁰ Taylor Hosking, “The Rise of the Alt-Right: Selections from The Atlantic’s coverage of 2017, when the right-wing movement gained momentum,” <https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2017/12/alt-right/549242/>.

¹¹ Damon T. Berry, *Blood & Faith* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2017): 128-129.

¹² *Ibid.*, 88-89.

as the speech community in question.¹³ Professor and semiotician Floyd Merrell notes that “signs can also become other signs and in the process take on radically distinct meanings,” even in circumstances when the sign’s transformation is caused by itself.¹⁴ The trend analyzed in this paper indeed represents a set of symbols and a collective historical memory which was set in motion early on in the 20th century but which took on a momentum of its own, largely along the self-automated lines described by Merrell. Perhaps the most important outcome of this snowball effect was a complex and somewhat inscrutable evolution which has become fundamentally heritable, an oral tradition of racist historical memory persistent in the modern day which negates the media portrayal of the Alt-Right as an unsophisticated aberration prompted by economic or circumstantial issues.

The speech community that this paper describes originated with a synthesis of European ideas of militarism and mysticism into one overarching body of identity, and there is substantial evidence that these ideas date as least as far back as the early 20th century, if not to the mid-19th. The preeminent scholar of Nazi esotericism, Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, remarks that the originator of Ariosophy and Völkisch ideology had a strong focus on the Crusades. This figure, Jörg Lanz, had a strong “desire to found a chivalrous order” which “evolved directly from his racist-élitist gnosis.”¹⁵ In particular, Lanz placed an emphasis on the pseudo-historical mythos of the Templars, which “stemmed from a reading of the medieval lays concerning Parsifal and the knights of the Grail,” which were experiencing a revivalist vogue due to their portrayal by Wagner in the opera.¹⁶ Thus began a significant artificial synthesis of Crusader ideology and Germanic folk occultism, and in turn the speech community described in this paper.

One could question to what extent it matters that the modern far right has embraced its historical roots in European militarism. Heritage scholar Rodney Harrison poses a similar question: “What does it mean to live amongst the spectral traces of the past, the heterogeneous piling up of materials in the present?”¹⁷ Indeed, the symbols and phrases from Charlottesville do resemble spectral traces of the past. It is more than understandable to wonder why it even matters what words and banners political extremists employ to their ends. However, Harrison arrives at the answer that “heritage is primarily *not* about the *past*, but instead about our

¹³ Paul Cobley, ed., *The Routledge Companion to Semiotics and Linguistics* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35-36

¹⁵ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots of Nazism* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1985): 106.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 107.

¹⁷ Rodney Harrison, *Heritage: Critical Approaches* (New York: Routledge, 2013): 3.

relationship with the *present* and the *future*.”¹⁸ The protests in Charlottesville and the persistence of historical political symbols on the internet and in physicality are testament to Harrison’s theory. More than simply being spectral traces, the symbols of far-right extremism are present and have significant bearing on politics today.

Therefore, to ground this argument somewhat in the actual modern political landscape, it helps to consider the evidence for the persistence of ethnic German and European nationalist groups in the United States and around the world in the present. In particular, German ethno-nationalists have couched themselves in terms of the neo-Völkisch culture, a late-20th century political movement founded by Steve McNallen and Danish immigrant Else Christensen based on Lanz’s earlier philosophy.¹⁹ In recent years, neo-Völkisch thought has undergone a significant revival. Similarly, Crusader imagery has experienced a thorough rebirth in the United States, as noted by historian and journalist David Perry, who writes that “modern xenophobic Europeans have adopted medieval crusader imagery for their cause,” quoting a post from the internet forum 4chan.²⁰ 4chan is home to message boards which function as hubs for far-right ideological adherents.²¹

A discussion of the far-right extremism present within the United States would be incomplete without a discussion of 4chan, one of the main staging grounds for the extreme right’s speech community. In particular, 4chan has cultivated a remarkable ecosystem of anonymity in which hatred goes largely unbridled. Moreover, there is a substantial argument to be made that anonymous forums including 4chan have had a large bearing on national politics as a whole. For example, in the 72 hours surrounding the election of Donald Trump on Nov. 8, 2016, there were 356 unique posts featuring the words “Deus Vult.”²² This invocation of a 12th century Crusading battle cry mirrors the Lanzian integration of European military symbols and language into an overarching political ethos.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹⁹ “Ideology: Neo-Völkisch,” *Southern Poverty Law Center*, accessed 14 April 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/neo-volkisch>.

²⁰ Dr. David M. Perry, “Crusades Imagery and Modern European Racism - The Crying Templar,” accessed 14 April 2018, <http://www.thismess.net/2016/08/crusades-imagery-and-modern-european.html>.

²¹ Dale Beran, “4chan: The Skeleton Key to the Rise of Trump,” accessed 14 April 2018, <https://medium.com/@DaleBeran/4chan-the-skeleton-key-to-the-rise-of-trump-624e7cb798cb>.

²² “Searching for posts that contain ‘deus vult’ and posts after 2016-11-07 and posts before 2016-11-09,” accessed 20 April 2018, http://archive.4plebs.org/_/search/text/deus%20vult/start/2016-11-07/end/2016-11-09/.

The particulars of Lanz's synthesis of militarism and occultism in the early 19th century are key to understanding the development of what I term as a speech community of far-right extremism which persists in the U.S. today in the form of the Alt-Right. The mythos of the Crusaders and the Ariosophists became inseparable with time: Lanz invented a new organization called the "Ordo Novi Templi" (ONT) and set out to spread the message of the new crusade.²³ Perhaps most importantly, the ONT gained among its members Guido von List, as well as Gustav Simons and Wilhelm Diefenbach, who would go on to architect German occultism in the interwar years.²⁴

The European extreme right began to come into its own in the years between the World Wars. The most important development postwar years was the full articulation of this synthetic ideology as "Ario-Christian' canon" in which Lanz proposed that "racial history is the key to the understanding of politics... all ugliness and evil stems from interbreeding."²⁵ While the Ario-Christians had employed a degree of racialized tactics in the past, the interwar period marked a formalization of the movement's racial focus and hierarchy. As many will note, the racialism of the early Ariosophist and Völkisch movements carried through the interwar period, especially in the founding of the Nazi Party (NSDAP). The NSDAP has been characterized as "clearly a part of the Völkisch movement."²⁶ Leading voices within the Party argued that race was crucial not only to understanding society as a whole, but to understanding history and philosophy.²⁷ Interestingly, the integration of Lanzian ideas of racial politics into the party platform of the NSDAP represents a formalization of historical memory into politics. Since the Nazis viewed race as inextricable from history and philosophy, one could view the NSDAP as a bridge between the arcane early theorists of the ario-Christian canon and the modern day extreme right, and thus emblematic of the speech community which has evolved in Europe over the last century.

Symbols, as previously argued, are one of the main elements of a speech community. For the purposes of this paper, there are a few symbols which bear particular interest in establishing the connections between the early, middle, and late periods of the speech community in question. Perhaps the most important symbol to consider is the Sonnenrad [Image 1], or black sun-wheel, figures largely in the semiotics of historical hate groups.²⁸

²³ Goodrick-Clarke, *The Occult Roots*, 109.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 113.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

²⁶ Samuel Koehne. "Were the National Socialists a Völkisch Party? Paganism, Christianity, and the Nazi Christmas." *Central European History* 47, no. 4 (2014): 762, doi:10.1017/S0008938914001897.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 765.

²⁸ "Deconstructing the symbols," *op. cit.*

According to Goodrick-Clarke, within the “neo-Nazi mythology, the lost war of 1939-45 is but a prelude to an even greater metaphysical conflict... the Black Sun [is] the source of spiritual light and inspiration, a sign of divine illumination and coming salvation.”²⁹ Likewise, a crusader might well view the act of “taking up the cross” as embracing coming salvation, either through good works or martyrdom. Indeed, there was comparison by the interwar Ariosophists between the two symbols: “It is worth noting this equivalency between the “cross” and the Quirl (Sonnenrad)...as symbols of the sun, for this was a broadly accepted notion in the Völkisch movement.”³⁰

In the present day, one can readily view the semblance between the symbols of the modern day far right and the parallel organizations which utilized these symbols to convey their mythos. During the Charlottesville protests, right wing extremists marched down the street with shields and banners bearing the Sonnenrad [Image 2]. Meanwhile, under the banner of the National Socialist Movement, ethno-nationalist protestors rallied against the removal of Confederate statues.³¹ More specifically, that same banner carries the “Othala Rune,” a Nordic rune which was appropriated by the Nazis for use in two Waffen SS divisions and once again today by the Alt-Right.³² Other protestors carried the “Valknot,” or knot of the slain, which “is ‘an Old Norse symbol that often represented the afterlife in carvings and designs,’ ... white supremacists who use the symbol for racist purposes also use it to demonstrate they are willing to give their lives to the Norse god Odin, typically in battle.”³³ It is quite fitting to view this collection of symbols as an extension of the preexisting ethno-nationalist speech community which emerged in the 20th century.

There can be little question that the far right today both models itself after and employs many of the same symbols as their historical predecessors, especially those related to violence and militarism. The Southern Poverty Law Center documents a 2017 hate group called the “Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights” (FOAK) founded by repeat felon Kyle Chapman.³⁴ The Alt-Knights “attend rallies suited up in homemade armor and equipped with batons, hammers, daggers, tasers and pepper spray,” and “seem to be less interested in defense than

²⁹ Nicholas Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun: Aryan Cults, Esoteric Nazism, and the Politics of Identity* (New York: NYU Press, 2001): 148. Accessed April 15, 2018. ProQuest Ebook Central.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

³² “Othala Rune,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed 14 April 2018, <https://www.adl.org/education/references/hate-symbols/othala-rune>.

³³ “Deconstructing the symbols and slogans,” op. cit.

³⁴ “Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights,” Southern Poverty Law Center, accessed 5 May 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/group/fraternal-order-alt-knights-foak>.

confrontation.”³⁵ According to the SPLC, the historical origins of the FOAK are evident: “Medieval references — like the armor crafted by one member — suffuse the language and imagery of FOAK. Indeed, they make numerous references to Christian warriors who fought against the Islamic Empire during the Crusades and... the Medieval battle cry “Deus Vult” graces the crest of the Alt-Knights.”³⁶ The FOAK, in some ways, can be compared to the Ordo Novi Templi, Lanz’s attempt at capturing and repeating the historical memory of the Crusades. In action, the FOAK appear to emulate the military style and practices of a medieval or early modern squadron, bearing large poles or spears, shields, and plate armor [Image 3]. Both groups fundamentally employed a set of symbols and phrases which are deeply linked to European notions of historical identity and violence to construct themselves as defenders against the perennial nonwhite “other.” The direct medieval references and strong symbolic linkages between the FOAK in addition to the Alt-Right as a whole and the historical European ideals of militarism and mysticism provide even further support for the notion of a speech community.

One key characteristic of European far-right ethno-nationalism is that, like its historical antecedents, it is a fundamentally transnational phenomenon, strengthening the aforementioned symbolic linkages. Extremism should not be reduced to the German tradition nor to the Crusades; indeed, Italian fascism had its own roots early in the 20th century and ultimately has become part of the historical memory observed by the modern far-right. Following the Second World War, there was a continuation of the Nazi occult mythos which have become part of the far-right canon. Significant figures in the postwar era such as Wilhelm Landig, one of the main proponents of Völkisch ideology in the 1950s, began to invoke the ideas of the philosopher and occultist Julius Evola, whose 1935 *Revolt Against the Modern World* became “the Bible of the Landig group.”³⁷ Evola’s philosophy conceptualized race as something deeper than skin: indeed, a fixed and unchanging part of each human’s spirit.³⁸ Evola thus imagined the formalized racism which emerged in the early 1900s as indeed part of a larger theoretical framework couched in philosophical prose.

Crucial to understanding Evola is grasping the semiotic background for his writing. One could easily dismiss Evola out of hand by virtue of the obscure nature of his writing, his arcane sources, and his obsession with semiology and race. However, Evola represents a continuation of the very same European mystical ideals which originated in the beginnings of the 20th

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Goodrick-Clarke, *Black Sun*, 129.

³⁸ A. James Gregor, *Mussolini’s Intellectuals* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 205.

century. In other words, Evola is very much part of the same speech community as Lanz. Evola particularly emphasizes “Clash of Civilizations” theory, one of the cornerstones of the extreme right, which emphasizes the perpetual struggle of Europe contra the East. Evola writes that “just like man, civilizations too after a dawn and ensuing development, eventually decline and die,” extending the notion of civilization even beyond bloodlines and race to “supernatural and nonhuman force of a higher order.”³⁹

Evola’s philosophy, in much the same way as the symbols of the Crusades and the Nazi occult, have come to figure prominently in the speech community of the Western far right. Indeed, the proto-fascist theories and occult writings of Evola have tangentially become part of the United States’ national political discourse. According to the Anti-Defamation League, the former chief strategist of the Trump administration, “[Stephen] Bannon... has expressed his enthusiasm for the alt right, a loose network of individuals and groups that promote white identity and reject mainstream conservatism in favor of politics that embrace implicit or explicit racism.”⁴⁰ A Feb. 2017 *New York Times* article titled “Steve Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists” notes that a “reference by Mr. Bannon to an esoteric Italian philosopher has gone little noticed, except perhaps by scholars and followers of the deeply taboo, Nazi-affiliated thinker, Julius Evola.”⁴¹ The article further clarifies that “Evola also caught on in the United States with leaders of the alt-right movement, which Mr. Bannon nurtured,” and cites white nationalist Richard Spencer’s endorsement of Bannon’s apparent admiration.⁴² The linkages between early 20th century fascist writing and the modern day are strong enough that they even have bearing on national political figures and events. One may wonder, in turn, whether we are to credit these far-right movements with originality in terms of their intellectual inspirations, or whether there is an academic trickle-down effect taking place within the Alt-Right.

The data prove inconclusive on this matter, but appear to point towards the former hypothesis. A Google Trends analysis of search frequency for key terms including “Evola” and “Julius Evola” suggests approximately a doubling in interest around the time that the *New York Times* article was published, followed by a stabilizing period when search frequencies stayed

³⁹ Julius Evola, “Revolt Against the Modern World” (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 1995): 55-56.

⁴⁰ “Steve Bannon: Five Things to Know,” *Anti-Defamation League*, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.adl.org/resources/backgrounders/steve-bannon-five-things-to-know>.

⁴¹ Jason Horowitz, “Steve Bannon Cited Italian Thinker Who Inspired Fascists,” *New York Times Online*, accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/02/10/world/europe/bannon-vatican-julius-evola-fascism.html>.

⁴² Ibid. Spencer himself gained notoriety for a speech in which he evoked Adolf Hitler’s speeches by calling out a “Hail Trump!” chant.

relatively high [Graph 3]. Trend results also indicate that the United States was not the only country where searches were focused: Italy and Northern Europe figured largely as well, confirming the prior argument about the transnationalism of this speech community.⁴³ Nonetheless, these results reveal little to answer the original question of origins.

To sum up: an analysis of the historical trends surrounding European mystical and military traditions reveals a timeline spanning back to the 1910s if not earlier as well as a long running transnational continuity. Who is to attribute that continuity represents a difficult sociological and historical question, but ultimately this analysis reveals a greater degree of historical memory and sophistication than an initial appraisal of far-right movements might suggest, in contrast to the picture of the far-right granted by journalistic media.

While the early portions of this paper focused on the dissonance between news articles which purport a decline in far right politics and data sets which demonstrate the opposite, attention must also be granted to the question of sophistication, which is likewise important to understanding this speech community and how it functions. Many analyses of the rise of ethno-nationalism in the United States rely too heavily on presuppositions about the role of economy and globalization. An article in the Chicago Tribune argues that “the same alienation and purposelessness that once defined [a new member’s] life had come to characterize that of so many others,” citing “an economy capsized, a job market contracted, a student-loan crisis erupted, and feelings of resentment and victimization.”⁴⁴ Another more recent article observes that “a white nationalist leader is partially responsible for coining the term “alternative right” back in 2008,” tacking on in parentheses that “it’s perhaps an interesting coincidence that it should overlap with the Great Recession.”⁴⁵

The author, as many others, attributes a resurgence in far-right extremism to the increased economic pressures following 2007. These general claims attributing substantial external forces are essentially the root of much of the misinformation surrounding the Alt-Right. While it stands to reason that many people are seeking some sort of explanation for what intuitively looks like a revival of 1940s era racial extremism, these analyses amount to little more than speculation since there is no direct way to tie economic discontent to this specific political movement, at least this early on. Other authors and individuals have also attempted to pinpoint

⁴³ Google Trends Search: “Evola,” accessed 19 April 2018, <https://g.co/trends/Q1S1d>.

⁴⁴ Terrence McCoy, “The road to hate: For six young men of the alt-right, Charlottesville is only the beginning,” accessed 19 April 2018, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-alt-right-young-men-charlottesville-20170819-story.html>.

⁴⁵ Julia Reiss, “The Alt-Right Has Killed and Injured at Least 100 People,” accessed 19 April 2018, <http://www.complex.com/life/2018/02/alt-right-has-killed-injured-100-people>.

the precise causes of the emergence of the Alt-Right but fall prey to the same logic. *New York Times* writer Jesse Singal argues that the Alt-Right “provides its audience easy scapegoats for their social, economic and sexual frustrations: liberals and feminists and migrants and, of course, globalists,” adding that “many neo-Nazis are obsessed with Sweden because of its ‘Nordic’ heritage.”⁴⁶ Evidently, even journalism of the most reputable quality tends to be susceptible to reductionist arguments regarding far-right extremism. While the article correctly identifies European influences in the culture of far right extremism, the author focuses on the abstract and portrays the culture as primitive and frustrated, obliterating any consideration of culture or historical memory within the movement. Suggesting that economics, globalization, or sexuality are the key movers in the far right may seem insightful but actually does very little to inform the historical discourse surrounding the rise of the Alt-Right as a coherent and heritable speech community, feeding in to the supposition that the movement is an aberration or will soon disappear into obscurity.

An examination of extremist websites and forums points towards a diversity of thought and a broad range of influences which reveal the importance of social media and historical legacy rather than abstract global forces. For example, the SPLC references an article from *The Right Stuff*, a publication which, together with noted neo-Nazi forum *The Daily Stormer*, “serve[s] as the core of neo-Nazism online.”⁴⁷ The specific article involved 74 participants outlining their introduction to hate rhetoric and how they became aware of the far right. Particularly illuminating in this analysis was a survey of these participants which analyzed the movements with which they affiliated as well as the media which pushed them towards the extreme right.

The first chart suggests that a vast majority of individuals who posted within this extremist forum identified politically with the Alt-Right, with smaller percentages characterizing themselves as Legacy White Nationalists, Libertarians, and Men’s’ Rights Activists. Tied for first place were the 4chan.org image board “/pol/,” or politics, and the white nationalist Jared Taylor.⁴⁸ This article points towards a more thorough understanding of the underground cultures of white nationalism in that it points out specifically the avenues through which individuals come to identify with extreme ideologies [Graph 4]. Other sources of influence

⁴⁶ Jesse Singal, “Undercover with the Alt-Right,” accessed 7 May 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/09/19/opinion/alt-right-white-supremacy-undercover.html>.

⁴⁷ Hatewatch Staff, “McInnes, Molyneux, and 4chan: Investigating pathways to the alt-right,” accessed 19 April 2018, <https://www.splcenter.org/20180419/mcinnnes-molyneux-and-4chan-investigating-pathways-alt-right>.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

included Gavin McInnes, founder of the “Proud Boys” movement (whose adherents were involved in the Charlottesville violence) and the Reddit online community “The_Donald.”⁴⁹ The sum total of these processes, as the article notes, appears to be a funnel which pushes people from one influencer to the next until they reach the furthest of the right-wing circles. *Wall Street Journal* writer Jack Nicas notes the same effect on Google video and social media platform YouTube, writing that “when users show a political bias in what they choose to view, YouTube typically recommends videos that echo those biases, often with more-extreme viewpoints.”⁵⁰

The apparent social media-influenced drive towards the extreme right which pervades internet platforms reveals that there are social factors in play which extend beyond the economy or national politics. As stated earlier, reductive arguments about the role of the Great Recession or about the current state of high politics reveal relatively little about the movement in question. However, the qualitative analysis which took place earlier in this paper reveals remarkable historical continuity, and indeed challenges the ways in which popular media perceive the Alt-Right and white nationalists in general.

The persistence of far-right extremism is an ongoing phenomenon with deep historical roots and a shared body of symbols and language. Viewing heritage as an active process, as Harrison suggests, reveals the importance of historical memory in current events, and points towards further areas for analysis and exploration. Some future points of examination might include an analysis of the early stages of the white nationalist movement in the United States, which could accurately be characterized as a segment of history within the context of this speech community but with its own unique set of symbols and beliefs. Moreover, the data sets available from the internet are nearly boundless, and search term frequency only scratches the surface of the information to be gleaned about the extreme right and its tendencies. Nonetheless, historical analysis remains a key tool for decoding the culture of the Alt-Right. The general principles of modern academic research and writing in the field of politics may encourage individuals not to take sides in their academic writing, and instead to present as much as possible an unbiased, neutral, intellectually driven position, as has been the goal of this paper. However, in this circumstance, we may reasonably argue that the extreme right wing within the United States as elsewhere deserves to be considered as a hateful and at times violent

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Jack Nicas, “How YouTube Drives People to the Internet’s Darkest Corners,” accessed 20 April 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/how-youtube-drives-viewers-to-the-internets-darkest-corners-1518020478>.

movement. The best way to combat a substantial, decentralized movement is to understand it, and understanding the extreme right must not exclude the substantial influence of memory.

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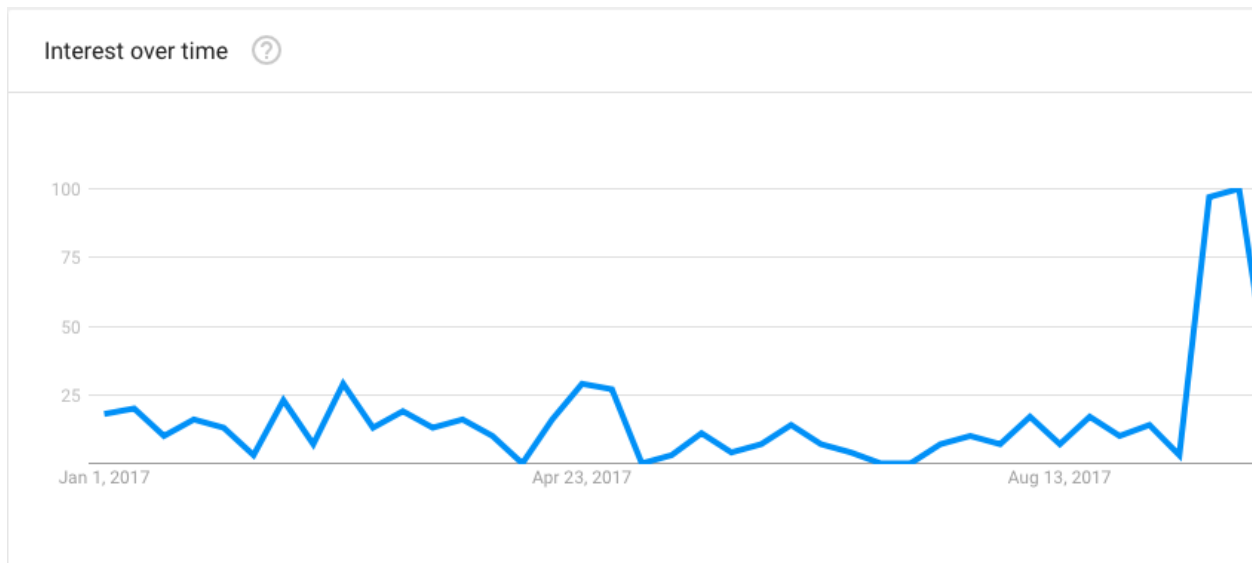
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“Völkisch, Jan. 2017-Jan. 2018,” Google Trends Search, 2018. <https://g.co/trends/fuMfp>.

APPENDIX 1. Graphs.



Graph 1: “Deus Vult, May 2013-September 2016,” Google Trends Search, 2018.

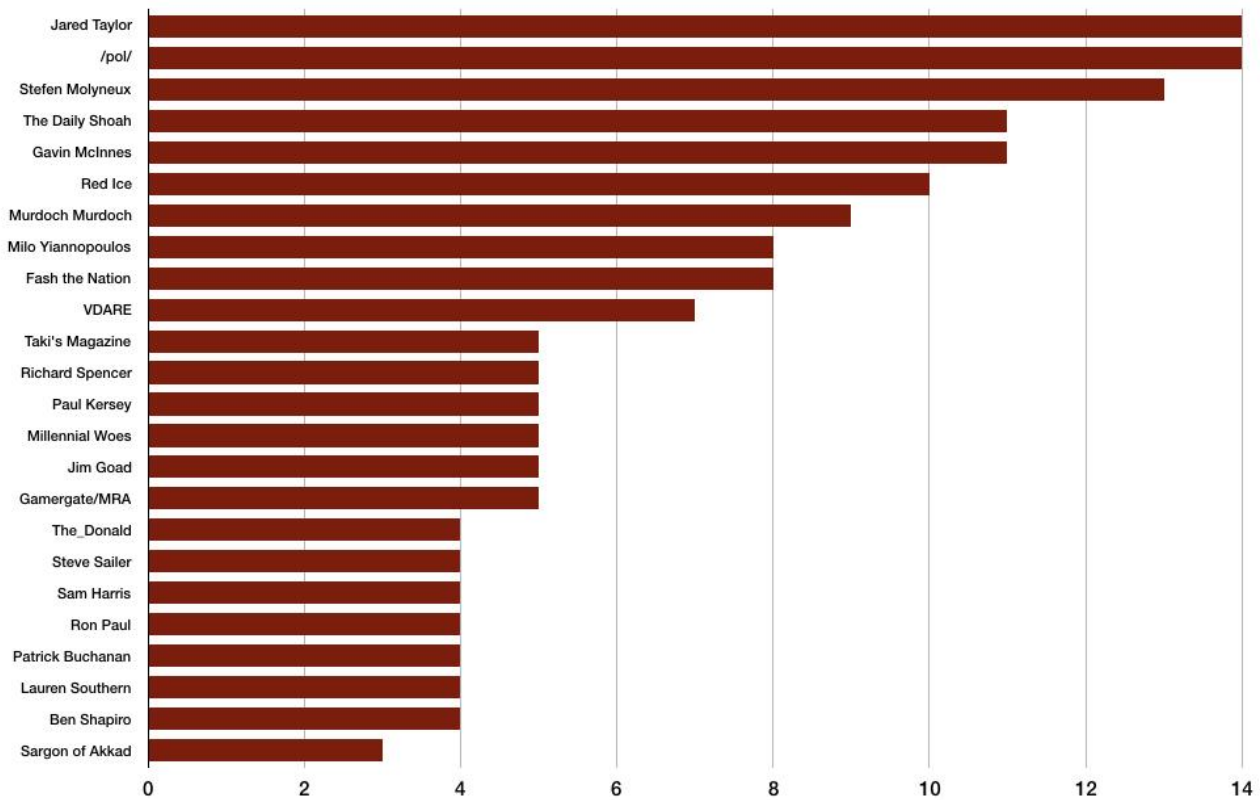


Graph 2: “Völkisch, Jan. 2017-Jan. 2018,” Google Trends Search, 2018.

Interest over time ?



Graph 3: “Evola, Jan. 2017-June 2017,” Google Trends Search, 2018.



Graph 4: “Number of times 74 users on The Right Stuff (TRS) cited each individual or platform as an influence that led them to the movement,” SPLC Survey, 2018.

APPENDIX 2. Glossary.

4chan.org: see **Message board** and **/pol/**; online forum spanning a variety of interests and subcultures which protects users' anonymity and hosts graphic and obscene content.

Alt-Lite: a political movement characterized as a toned-down version of the Alt-Right, generally differs with the extreme right on the "Jewish Question."

Alt-Right: a political movement which formally began in the United States shortly following Donald Trump's Presidential election campaign in 2016. Categorized as a far-right group by the SPLC and generally known for extreme racial and political views.

Ariosophy: "wisdom concerning the Aryans," an esoteric belief system preceding **Völkisch** culture, largely associated with **Jörg Lanz** and Guido von List.⁵¹

Bannon, Stephen K.: Former chief strategist to President Donald Trump, espouses radical right-wing views and was considered mouthpiece of **Alt-Right** in the administration.

Charlottesville Protests: series of dramatic protests resulting in a death and dozens of injuries surrounding the removal of statues from the University of Virginia campus in 2017.

Crusader cross: or Jerusalem Cross, Five-Fold Cross; cross known for its role as one of the main symbols of European militant pilgrims to the Holy Land during the **Crusades**.

Crusades: a series of military operations involving popular mobilization from the 11th-15th centuries set in motion by Pope Urban II's speech at Clermont.⁵²

"Deus Vult": proclamation invoked during Pope Urban II's speech at Clermont, later used as a battle cry by participants in the **Crusades** and again today by far-right extremists.⁵³

Evola, Julius: foundational theorist of Italian fascism, controversial for advocacy of extreme racial and male supremacy.

Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights: organization founded by Kyle Chapman which styles itself as a military group along the lines of the orders which participated in the **Crusades**.

Great Recession: Period of economic downturn from 2007-2009 sparked by crises in the housing and financial markets.

Historical memory: defined in this paper as the socially collectivized set of symbols, language, and events which provide the foundation for what a given culture views as its "history."

⁵¹ Goodrick-Clarke, *Occult Roots*, 106.

⁵² Dana C. Munro, "Urban and the Crusaders", *Translations and Reprints from the Original Sources of European History*, Vol 1:2, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1895), 5-8

⁵³ *Ibid.*

Jewish Question: or JQ; foundational question of Nazi-era antisemitism which preceded the Holocaust, generally questioning what to do about the perceived negative influence of Jews.

Lanz, Jörg: founding figure within Ariosophy and Völkisch culture, founder of Ordo Novi Templi, occultist and anti-Semitic pamphleteer.

Message board: online forum where posts are generated with messages and shared jokes, or “memes.”

/pol/: message board on **4chan.org**, source of virulent anti-Semitic and racist posts, known as one of the founding sites of the **Alt-Right**.

Richard Spencer: far-right ethno-nationalist, supposedly coined the term **Alt-Right**, featured speaker in Charlottesville preceding the protests.

Sonnenrad: see Appendix 2; sun-wheel or black sun which figures largely in the history of the Nazi occult. Appropriated by the Alt-Right and displayed in **Charlottesville protests**.

Speech Community: linguistic term for informal human cultural groups in which a collective set of signs, language, and symbols are passed down generationally.⁵⁴

Völkisch: a cultural-religious movement which gained prominence in Germany preceding the First World War, characterized by intense racialized hatred and antisemitism. Involved eclectic religious beliefs including belief in an ancient Aryan priesthood and sun-god **Wotan**.⁵⁵

Wotan: or Odin; deity figure prominent in Nordic traditions and myths, referenced in **Völkisch** and **Ariosophic** traditions.

⁵⁴ Cobley, *Routledge Companion to Semiotics*, 31.

⁵⁵ Koehne, “Were the National Socialists a Völkisch Party?” op. cit., 766.

APPENDIX 3. Images and Symbols.

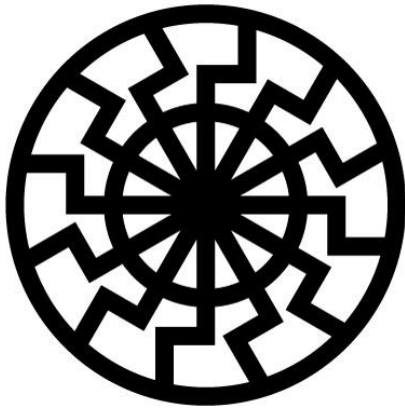


Image 1. *Sonnenrad* by *Washington Post* Staff, 2017. *Washington Post Online*.

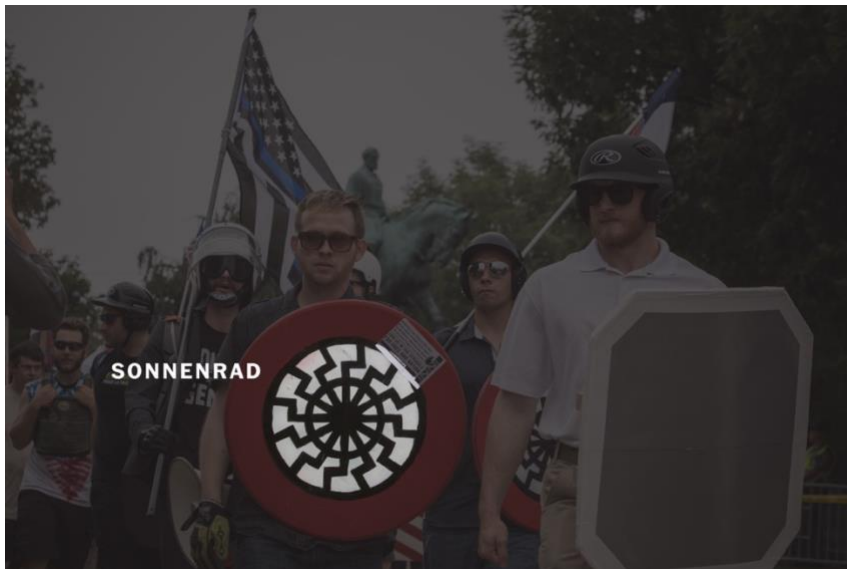


Image 2. *Sonnenrad in Charlottesville* by *Washington Post* Staff, 2017. *Washington Post Online*.



Image 3. *Fraternal Order of Alt-Knights*, Southern Poverty Law Center, 2017.

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Author Commentary

Christian Maines

I was inspired to write about the history of right-wing nationalism by several different events which had taken place prior to my matriculation at Princeton. In particular, after the Charlottesville attacks in 2016, I began to dig deeper into the online subcultures of the far right, not knowing that this curiosity would manifest in academic writing. As a student of history, I was intrigued by the use of historical symbols by modern-day actors, and the way in which these symbols were utilized outside of their original context. Even within the last month, there has been substantial evidence for a rising tide of right-wing extremism, and this argument is underscored in the use of the *Sonnenrad* and other symbols by the perpetrator of the Christchurch attacks this month.

My main issue when I was consulting with my instructor, Dr. Ljung, was coming up with a substantial “motive” for writing my paper. In the class, with my prior papers, I had struggled with this concept, but by the third project I began to understand its importance. In short, if you’re making (or attempting to make) a scholarly contribution with your writing, you have to contextualize it within the academic literature on the subject and ensure that what you’re writing (a) has not already been written and (b) is more than just a book review on the subject matter. To point (b), I was confronted by a dearth of literature on the specific issues I wanted to address. I then realized that I would have to create a comprehensive review of several different academic topics and knit them all into one paper, to ensure that my contribution was novel and well-sourced.

One of the most complicated aspects of writing a paper in the humanities and social sciences such as this one is that the methodology and statistical methods employed are generally subject to the author’s preferences, unlike in the “hard sciences.” In my paper, I employed some measures and quantitative analysis simply to highlight and explain my points rather than to draw statistical conclusions. In the future, I could imagine myself expanding this sort of study to encompass a wider set of data on internet trends (for example, utilizing the Twitter API to gather data on relevant images and references). To this point, I learned from Dr. Ljung that just as much as you need to work on constantly improving your research and writing, you should have an equal amount of confidence in your ability to make a substantial and respectable contribution to academic discourse.

Editor Commentary

Ellie Shapiro

I am thrilled to be commenting on this year's feature, which displays excellent execution of not one, but at least half a dozen lexicon terms. Christian's paper takes the seemingly impenetrable topic of the Alt-right and relies on primary source analysis to make a nuanced and insightful claim about the group. Perhaps most impressive is his ability to sustain and build this complexity throughout the paper. This is no doubt indicative of a strong structure and use of motive to maintain the relevance of each point needed to prove his thesis.

By far my favorite structuring aspect of this piece is Christian's use of "tie back sentences," that is, sentences included at the ends of paragraphs that summarize the paragraph's main claim. His consistent use of this technique keeps the reader in check and helps immensely in presenting an accessible, easily understood argument. Through his inclusion of these argumentative "signposts," Christian demonstrates a keen audience awareness and acknowledges the importance of guiding the reader along. He uses them particularly effectively to build the paper's overall argument: each tie back sentence adds something new to the current understanding of the argument and furthers it a little bit more. They reiterate his paper's argument without being repetitive.

To further facilitate building his multi-layered argument as well as sustain the reader's interest, Christian relies on the use of motive throughout his paper. Often a foreign concept when we enter Writing Seminar, students usually include their motive in the introduction as a sort of formality, only to forget about it a sentence later. His paper, in contrast, demonstrates how motive can and should be referred back to multiple times throughout a successful paper, not merely once or twice, but continuously. He accomplishes this by introducing smaller motives throughout the paper in topic sentences and in short motivating paragraphs. This continual reference back to motive gives Christian's argument relevance and each paragraph a purpose in the broader claim.

Professor Commentary

Emma Ljung, Princeton Writing Program

Making Sense of Horrible Things

Research is never comfortable. There are few scholars who have not missed sleep over their work. Try finding an academic who has never complained about neck- and back pain and you will come up with none. Let's face it: to do research at the highest level is an intellectual endeavor that mars our bodies. But some topics also have the potential of marring our souls. By requiring us to immerse ourselves in materials that are downright scary, they force us to confront the darkest and most disturbing facets of humanity: hatred, racism, intolerance, oppression, violence. Christian Maines' essay required such immersion. In his research, Christian noticed that the modern-day far-right makes use of heritage symbols and historical memory from early European history in a manner that reveals a much greater degree of sophistication and culture within the extreme right than what current scholarship and journalism seem to realize. But to make sense of this initial discovery required detailed analysis and thus extensive study of the same source material that current scholarship misunderstands. So not only did Christian have to make a bold Gaipa move in pointing out that scholarly consensus is fundamentally wrong, but he had to do so by studying truly *horrible* things: copious amounts of soul-crushing data that collectively demonstrated that humans are, quite frankly, awful.

From a scholarly perspective, Christian's discoveries are obviously helpful: if we ascribe stupidity to a particularly problematic group, and use that premise in our dealings with that group, we are unlikely to be successful if it turns out that the basic premise is fundamentally incorrect. But more impressively, Christian's research shows a remarkable conviction that anything can be studied, even the darkest, scariest things – and this can be done productively, with your soul unharmed, if you maintain a scholarly distance to your work. This is a lesson to all the members of our scholarly community: we *are* not our work – we *do* our work. As Christian's instructor, I find that lesson instrumental. But that is not why this essay is truly important, a piece of scholarly writing that everyone, everywhere, should be talking about – because unlike most academic essays, this essay is relevant for our lives, in this world, right now. Footage from the Christchurch shooting reveals that the shooter was using the same *Sonnenrad* symbol that Christian researched for this essay. Google Analytics demonstrate that the slogan *Deus Vult* that Christian's essay discusses is still very much in vogue. If we choose to ignore

certain horrors because they are too difficult to face and we are worried about damage to our souls, nothing will ever change.

More than anything, Christian's essay shows us that we have a responsibility to make sense of horrible things because it is the only way we can transform them into a fragment of the past.

Bios

Christian Maines '21 is a history concentrator from Houston, TX. He is an RCA in Butler College, and outside the classroom he can be found reading in Rare Books or playing Springdale Golf Course. He is pursuing certificates in Archaeology and History and Practice of Diplomacy. He wrote this paper as a first-year.

Ellie Shapiro '21 is a sophomore majoring in Electrical Engineering, but she harbors a secret desire to switch to English and spend her days discussing writing and analyzing rhetoric. After reading a few *Tortoise* publications her freshman year and loving Writing Seminar, she knew she was destined to become a Writing Center Fellow and work as a *Tortoise* editor. In her free time, she enjoys biking around New Jersey and walking at the beach near her home in Westport, Connecticut. She wrote this as a sophomore.