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## From letters to bombs. Transnational ties of West German right-wing extremists, 1972–1978

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### ABSTRACT

Extremists cooperate internationally to ‘influence and succeed’ or ‘survive and thrive’ [Moghadam, A. (2017). *Nexus of Global Jihad: Understanding cooperation among terrorist actors*. Columbia University Press (p. 21)]. Yet, the question of how such cooperation materializes and develops has been understudied, especially for right-wing extremism in the post-war era. Therefore, this paper studies a phase of heightened transnational activity of West German right-wing extremists between 1972 and 1978. It zooms in on the Nationalsozialistische Kampfgruppe Großdeutschland and the Gruppe Otte, which were spatially and temporally connected by the American neo-Nazi Gary Lauck, who led the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei – Auslandsorganisation. To study and qualify the impact of transnational engagement on the West German extreme right, the paper introduces a new analytical framework that integrates the historical transnational approach with insights from terrorism studies. Pairing known case studies to previously unused primary source material, the paper argues that the transnational connections between the three groups transformed from indirect to direct cooperation, while evolving across ideological, logistical, and operational domains, and resulted in political violence. It concludes that the extremist cooperation marked the professionalization and multi-lateralization of the West German extreme right in the 1970s.

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## Introduction

Although ultra-nationalism seems to imply that ethnocentric visions of nationhood preclude cross-border mobilization or coordination, right-wing extremists have always worked towards the founding of an ‘International of the Nationalists’ in the face of paranoid perceptions of threat and enemy – whether before, during, or after World War Two.<sup>1</sup> In the 1970s, West-German right-wing extremists equally sought international recognition, support, and cooperation in their quest to ‘liberate’ West Germany from alleged Jewish influence and Communist invaders, and restore National Socialist rule. As one German extremist wrote to another in Argentina: ‘Only the cooperation with the other

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Nazi-forces in Europe and overseas offers the possibility for the world-wide fight against the international Jewish riffraff who strive for world domination!' (Otte, 1976a). He perceived the threat as global, and therefore the fight too.

Yet in West Germany, laws that ought to prevent the re-emergence of Nazism severely complicated the organization and mobilization of neo-Nazis domestically. Because of the civil liberties that American citizens enjoyed, the benefits of engaging in a transatlantic alliance appealed to many West German right-wing extremists. Arguably the best-known German right-wing extremist of the twentieth century, Michael Kühnen (1979) noted that the legal status of American neo-Nazi organizations enabled large-scale propaganda, the publication of extremist magazines, and the production of stickers and posters sporting the swastika. Consequently, German extremists pursued alliances with their American counterparts. The exchanges that subsequently took place affected the organization and action repertoires of the West German extreme right, and thus its historical trajectory. To unpack that impact, the present paper answers the following question: What was the function of transnational connections in the historical development of the extreme right in West Germany between 1972 and 1978? How did these connections materialize, develop, and disappear, and what were their consequences?

To unpack the mechanisms of transnational engagement between German and American extremists, the paper zooms in on the Nationalsozialistische Kampfgruppe Großdeutschland (National Socialist Combat Group Greater Germany, NSKG), that engaged with American neo-Nazis from 1971 onwards, marking a phase of heightened transnational right-wing extremism (Simonelli, 1998). This connection strengthened when one of the Americans, the teenager Gary Lauck, established the Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei–Auslandsorganisation (National Socialist German Workers' Party-Foreign Organization; NSDAP/AO) in 1972 and began to cooperate with Paul Otte in 1976. Appointed by Lauck as 'national leader' (*Reichsleiter*) for Germany and Austria in the same year, Otte extended Lauck's 'illegal arm' in West Germany (Kühnen, 1982, p. 50). Although the transnational connections of the West German extreme right developed further, the analysis will end in 1978, when Otte's apprehension marked the end of the cooperation.

Tracing this evolution of transnational ties, the paper argues that the transnational engagement peaked between 1976 and 1977, and that, because it included joint ideological, logistical, and operational activities, had both a higher quality and a bigger impact on the West German extreme right in the 1970s than established by the literature so far (Jackson & Shekhovtsov, 2014a; Kahn, 2021). In so doing, this study offers the first in-depth analysis of the evolving cooperation between Lauck and the two German right-wing extremist groups, based on previously unused archival material. Illuminating that their exchange extended beyond a postal propaganda service of neo-Nazi material to include political violence, the paper maps an uncharted phase in the historical trajectory of the West German extreme right and thereby contributes to the literature on transnational right-wing extremism and historical terrorism studies. Conceptually, the paper examines processes of securitization within extremist groups and argues that transnational exchange resulted from shared perceptions of Communist and Jewish threats. Finally, the paper introduces an analytical framework that qualifies right-wing extremist transnational exchange by integrating the historical transnational approach with insights from terrorism studies, as explained below.

In the following, I will first offer a review of the literature on transnational right-wing extremism and subsequently propose a new transnational approach. I will then structure

the paper by analyzing three phases of transnational extremist engagements in the 1970s, before ending with several concluding considerations.

## Literature review

Extreme right-wing violence and terrorism in the 1970s have remained a 'blind spot' in the historiography of political violence in West-Germany (Manthe, 2021, p. 50; see also Manthe, 2020). Even less is known about contemporary right-wing extremists' transnational correspondence and visits overseas. Both older and more recent studies primarily focused on the post-war Anglo-American axis (Geary et al., 2020; Jackson, 2019; Jackson & Shekhovtsov, 2014b; Kaplan & Bjørgo, 1998; Kaplan & Weinberg, 1999), except for Macklin (2013) and Koehler (2014), who shed light on Anglo-German relationships in the 1990s and 2000s instead. Most recently, focusing on the global level, Hart (2021) established that the threat perceptions held by right-wing extremists internationally aligned in correspondence to the 'four waves of terrorism' throughout history (Rapoport, 2004). Highlighting international Cold War developments as catalysts of right-wing extremist violence in the 1970s, Hart did not link these to moments of transnational engagement. Kahn (2021) argued that American neo-Nazi influence decisively affected West German right-wing extremism. This paper supports Kahn's argument, but challenges her focus on the relationship between Lauck and Kühnen as the epitome of transnational contact in the 1970s. Instead, I stress the significance of Lauck's connection to Otte for the West German extreme right in the 1970s; an American-German axis of extremism overlooked by scholarship and the media alike.

## Methodology and sources

The present paper employs a transnational approach and focuses on the movement and interaction of people and commodities across national boundaries (Clavin, 2005). In applying the approach to right-wing extremism, this study argues that transfer and exchange, understood as the cross-border dissemination of right-wing extremist (ideas about) action repertoires, only really materialized because of a shared threat perception and a common sense of purpose (Acosta & Childs, 2013; Bond, 2010; Karmon, 2005; Moghadam, 2017). However, this has been insufficiently analyzed for transnational right-wing extremist cooperation. To bring that deficit to light, the paper distinguishes between two categories of transnational contact: indirect and direct. The absence of a clear connection between sender and receiver characterizes indirect connections. Although indirect transfers focus on the reception and local implementations of ideas and thus are not a powerful form of cooperation, they can lead to more concrete engagements in the future. These are direct connections that require actual interaction between members on both sides, via postal correspondence or physical meetings. Direct interaction creates stronger organizational linkages between extremists and thus points to the higher quality of an alliance, because integrating organizational resources (finances, weapons, skills) or structures (mergers or promotion of foreign leaders) can increase the groups' lifespan and capacity for (violent) action (Moghadam, 2017). Alongside these benefits, drawbacks exist too. Direct interaction is riskier, because it presents the

authorities with more contact moments to trace on the one hand and depends on a precarious balance of mutual trust and personal ambition on the other.

To further qualify these two forms of transnational contact and answer the question of how extremists venture into an alliance of higher quality, the paper integrates the transnational approach with Karmon's typology of terrorist cooperation (2005). Karmon distinguished between ideological, logistical, and operational cooperation. By adopting these domains, this paper introduces an analytical framework (Table 1) that furthers our understanding of the direct and indirect types of right-wing transnational engagement. Moreover, the framework helps illuminate how cooperative relationships evolve across the three domains and thus accounts for the dynamic nature of transnational alliances. Indirect ideological support constitutes the low-end, and each move downwards in the table is an incremental step towards direct operational engagement as the high-end of cooperation. This paper will highlight examples of both types across the three domains and specifically zoom in on direct exchanges, because these, as I will argue, affected the extreme right's organizational structure and practices more strongly, and resulted in committing violence.

To trace the extremists' engagements, this paper draws from right-wing extremist newspapers and letters, police reports, and court documents in the archives of the anti-fascist organization Apabiz in Berlin, the Landesarchiv Nordrhein Westfalen, and the Federal Archives of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). In addition, I use reports orally delivered by Hans Dieter Lepzien, under the code name 'Otto Folkmann,' to the Staatssicherheitsdienst (State Security Service, Stasi) of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Lepzien was the right-hand man of Paul Otte and 'security officer' for the NSDAP/AO in West Germany and therefore had full access to incoming and outgoing information. The developing cooperation between Lepzien and the Stasi revolved around intelligence collection for the Stasi to prevent terrorism, regardless of ideology, from spilling into East Germany. They did not aim to exploit Lepzien as a right-wing terrorist to inflict harm on West Germany (Blumenau, 2020). Moreover, Lepzien played a double role; he was also an informant for the Landesamt für Verfassungsschutz (State Office for the Protection of the Constitution, LfV) in Lower Saxony. However, the Federal Archives, where these files are located, deny access to Lepzien's – and other right-wing informants' – case files. Still, the comparison of the Stasi-files to the documents the Federal Archives did release shows that Lepzien reported the same information to the Stasi.

### *A short-lived transatlantic operational alliance*

Transnational cooperation between German and American right-wing extremists entered a phase of heightened activity between 1971 and 1972. When the Rote Armee Fraktion

**Table 1.** Indirect and direct transnational cooperation.

Domains	Indirect	Direct
Ideological	Pledge of allegiance; identification of role models; copying of manifestos	Exchange of ideological content via letters or at meetings
Logistical	Leaving behind magazines; mailing propaganda material to address lists	Transaction of finances, weapons, and knowledge
Operational	Inspiring the imitation or adoption of (violent) action repertoires	Merging of groups; preparing and executing attacks

(Red Army Faction, RAF) engaged in shoot-outs with the police during the last three months of 1971, the dominant threat perception of 'subversive Communist' elements transformed into a paranoid frenzy of 'murderous' left-wing terrorist preparing the grounds for a Soviet invasion in the eyes of one right-wing extremist. Grown up in the Cold War era, Manfred Knauber identified the RAF as a 'nucleus of a red terror army' that operated as the Soviets' extension within West Germany and feared Soviet expansion as the 'world danger for the whole of humanity' (LG Düsseldorf, 1976). But judging other right-wing extremist groups as 'inoperable,' Knauber aspired to combat that danger himself. He did not want to establish 'an old maid's club,' but a paramilitary organization that would act as the 'executors of [Hitler's] will' (LG Düsseldorf, 1976).

On the evening of 22 April 1972, nine men, dressed in brown Nazi-uniforms and waving little swastika flags, toasted to the founding of the Nationalsozialistische Kampfgruppe Großdeutschland (NSKG). Given the group's efforts to stockpile weapons to prepare for a Communist invasion, the NSKG did not strategically diverge from its predecessors, such as the Europäische Befreiungsfront (European Liberation Front, EBF) or Gruppe Hengst (Group Hengst), nor in its proclaimed quest of 'saving' Germany (LG Düsseldorf, 1976). However, Knauber realized that in order to create 'an effective counter-instrument to the Communist International,' domestically epitomized by the RAF but active on all fronts, he himself needed to be part of an international network too (LG Düsseldorf, 1976). What thus set the NSKG apart from its predecessors was Knauber's initial engagement, growing correspondence, and subsequent alliance with a German who remained in New York City after serving his time as a prisoner of war there, Albert Brinkmann. The nature of the contact between Brinkmann and Knauber matured within a few months in 1971, from written expressions of solidarity to logistical support in the form of membership recruitment adverts in Brinkmann's magazine, to reach the stage of a direct operational alliance.

Several factors informed the urge to foster American-German connections. The first related to the shared threat perceptions of a 'judeo-bolshevist enemy' that had forced the ban on the NSDAP in its attempt to rid the world of National Socialists. In his magazine *Das Banner*, published early 1971, Knauber had written that '[t]he Marxist and Jewish ideology [is] in reality only one and finds its expression in Bolshevism' (LG Düsseldorf, 1976). In full agreement, Brinkmann republished Knauber's article in the *NS-Kurier* a year later, a sign of direct logistical and ideological exchange.<sup>2</sup> Brinkmann added that 'Germans at home and abroad' should combat the 'red world plague' and 'lethally dangerous Jews' (Staatsanwaltschaft Düsseldorf, 1973). The combination of the Jewish people and Communism constituted an even more powerful threat and rested on the myth of judeo-bolshevism, which blamed the Jewish people for inventing Communism to achieve world domination (Hanebrink, 2020). This image of the judeo-bolshevist threat provided Brinkmann and Knauber not just with a common ideological discourse, but also with a fruitful basis for direct engagement at the highest level. Indeed, Knauber stated he had propagated the 'Elimination of International Judaism as the Original Source of All Human Evil' alongside 'the Destruction of Bolshevism' in order to establish effective connections with right-wing extremists abroad (Staatsanwaltschaft Düsseldorf, 1973). And as he hoped, from these shared threat perceptions and aligned goals, common solutions to fight the enemy also emerged.

Those solutions related to the second driver of the transnational alliance: practical considerations. The difficulty to mobilize and organize within West Germany because of anti-Nazi laws starkly contrasted with the freedom of speech and the right to organize around a wide array of political ideologies that American right-wing extremists could enjoy. Hence, when Brinkmann proposed to Knauber that all West German neo-Nazi groups 'should join an NSDAP to be founded in the U.S. for legal reasons' and from there 'enforce admission [of the NSDAP] in the homeland,' the semblance of legality appealed to Knauber (Staatsanwaltschaft Düsseldorf, 1973). Still, Knauber convinced Brinkmann to join the NSKG, to strengthen his own reputation. So, Brinkmann formally subjected his group to Knauber and changed the name of his American Bund Deutscher Nationalsozialisten (League of German National Socialists, BDNS) into the NSKG's subdivision 'Horst Wessel.' The subjugation marked the successful transformation of the men's correspondence into a direct cooperative relationship.

The third and fourth factor that drove the transatlantic alliance were interrelated: personal ambitions and inter-group rivalry. To Brinkmann, being able to claim a partnership with the group that aspired to become 'the overarching organization' for National Socialism mattered in order to build up a solid reputation and financial base in America (Bundeskriminalamt, 1976). Brinkmann therefore appointed the 19-year-old Gary Lauck, whom he had recruited in June 1972, as his deputy and ordered him 'to secure the NSKG-connection' (LG Düsseldorf, 1976). Born to German-American parents and raised in a German-nationalist spirit, Lauck identified as a 'German living abroad' first and American citizen second only, which had prompted him to join National Socialist organizations that '[embodied] his political and ideological ideas' (LG Koblenz, 1976). In the autumn of 1972, Lauck flew to West Germany and attended several meetings of the NSKG, where he financially contributed to their plans and expressed his support for the ideological, paramilitary struggle against the ban on the NSDAP (LG Koblenz, 1976). But the Americans were not alone in exploiting the connection to their personal interest. Within Germany, the export of the NSKG's 'brand' to the US provided Knauber with a sense of 'momentum' (Moghadam, 2017, p. 10). Knauber used the merger as a pretext to boast about his power within West Germany and to present his paramilitary group as stronger than it actually was because of its overseas connection – vainly expecting to boost recruitment too (LG Düsseldorf, 1976).

This transnational connection, based on shared ideological visions of National Socialist world domination and common enemy and threat perceptions, laid the groundworks for an enduring transnational relationship between American and German right-wing extremists, despite being curtailed by the NSKG-members' arrest in October 1972. But to understand *how* it could evolve into an enduring direct logistical and operational alliance, we should examine how Lauck's experiences in Germany shaped his subsequent strategy and actions. Upon his arrival in the United States late October 1972, Lauck broke off his connections to Brinkmann, given that Brinkmann now was the liaison of a defunct German group. Apart from the fact that Lauck considered the NSKG exemplary for its ideological quality, he attributed the group's apprehension to two mistakes. To avoid those in the future, he developed a new strategy embodied by his own organization, the NSDAP-Auslandsorganisation, in December 1972.

First, Lauck emphasized the need for strategical reorganization into 'cells (...) to prevent the entire organization from collapsing by infiltration or a single arrest' (Lauck,



1976a). Second, he re-conceptualized the right-wing extremist understanding of the 'underground struggle.' Instead of using arms, Lauck advocated to wage a 'propagandistic underground war,' to which end he published the German-language newspaper *NS-Kampfruf* alongside thousands of swastika stickers and posters with anti-Semitic and anti-Communist slurs (Lauck, 1976a). As Kahn (2021) stated, the *NS-Kampfruf* provided the extremists with a 'forum' (p. 96) to exchange a hazy brew of aggressive anti-Semitic rhetoric and well-worn right-wing liturgies of Jewish conspiracies to dominate and rule the world, combined with warnings for the biological threat the Jewish race allegedly posed to the purity of the German people. Smuggled into West Germany and distributed at neo-Nazi gatherings, the magazine secured the indirect ideological exchange between Lauck and the German right-wing extremists. Still, after the arrest of the NSKG, Lauck had to rebuild his personal transatlantic connections from scratch.

### ***Re-establishing and intensifying contact: a secret 'visit to the front'***

Dreaming of a National Socialist International to 'fight against the Nazi ban' in West Germany and 'save the Aryan race,' Lauck underlined the importance of relationships between national socialists in different countries (Lauck, 1976a). In the *NS-Kampfruf*, for example, Lauck published that 'through (...) comradesly meetings and joint actions, our comrades must be shown that they are not alone in Germany, but that forces against our common enemy are also at work in other countries' (Lauck, 1974a). With that, Lauck emphasized the fertile ground that common threat perceptions created for extremists worldwide. To exploit that fertile ground, Lauck attached great value to traveling to the FRG, trips he dubbed 'visits to the front.' It was during the first of those 'visits' that the transnational cooperation between Lauck and West German right-wing extremists materialized again and transformed from indirect logistical support into direct ideological and logistical exchange.

Exemplary of his activities during that first visit was the lecture Lauck held at conspirative meetings throughout West Germany. On 10 November 1974, a well-known German Nazi-veteran, Thies Christophersen, introduced Lauck as the guest speaker of the evening at a closed meeting in Hamburg. In front of about 100 (neo-)Nazis, Lauck held a speech titled 'why Americans still revere Adolf Hitler' and elaborated on the NSDAP/AO and its strategy of independent cells waging an underground propaganda war (Lauck, 1974b). Young and old loudly applauded Lauck, raised their arms in the Hitler salute, and hoisted the Nazi-flag on the occasion. Satisfied, the next day Lauck read the headlines about the 'major scandal' he had caused in Hamburg, while the 'alarmed police [stood] powerless' ('Skandal', 1974).

It was exactly the effect Lauck had wanted to achieve, because it helped him to diffuse his message and strategy among German extremists. He aimed to recruit them for his movement, based on their shared veneration of Hitler, National Socialism, and their vision of a fight against the West German government and its ban on the NSDAP. Alongside the distribution of the *NS-Kampfruf*, gatherings like these marked the introduction of the NSDAP/AO to the broader West German scene. That effect was amplified as the speech was published in the *NS-Kampfruf* and had been recorded on tape and subsequently circulated throughout the scene (Otte, ca. 1974–1976). The exchange of such cultural artifacts revealed that the material dimension to post-war right-wing extremism played a key role in



the dissemination of ideological messages and the vision of a besieged ideology. As such, they helped maintain a growing network of kindred spirits and fostered the notion of a (trans)national movement (Burke, 2020).

Within just three years, Lauck's propaganda campaign, launched in the last days of 1972, energized the extreme right and fostered a renewed sense of cohesion within a previously fragmented scene. As 1975 witnessed the successful indirect logistical and operational transfer of his ideas and practices, Lauck had consolidated his impact on the extremist repertoire of action. To begin with, the publication of the *NS-Kampfruf* introduced an aggressive form of anti-Semitic rhetoric that colluded with the extreme right's historical revisionist sub-culture that denied the Holocaust. As a combined effect, anti-Semitism came to dominate the discourse of the extreme right again, illustrating the success of Lauck's intended transfer of threat and enemy perceptions through the magazine's circulation. Relatedly, a stronger orientation towards neo-Nazism appeared. Whereas the number of registered members of the entire right-wing spectrum constantly declined throughout the 1970s, the current of neo-Nazis steadily swelled (BMI, 1977). Finally, these developments crystallized in the shifting action repertoire of the extreme right. The official numbers confirmed the change from using violence to spreading propaganda from the underground, with extremists operating in small cells – just as Lauck had advocated. Lauck's campaign inspired at least 70 NSDAP/AO-related offences recorded within little over two years, while the number of violent crimes continued to decline (Bundeskriminalamt, 1976). The name 'NSDAP/AO' was daubed on walls as a slogan, together with the swastika, as the expression of a cohesive movement. Jewish shops and institutions also received the leaflets and posters in their mailboxes, just as museums with exhibitions on Judaism did. The targets of the campaign confirmed the centrality of the Jewish people in the threat and enemy perception of the extremists (Bundeskriminalamt, 1976). Indeed, at the end of 1975, Lauck praised the efficiency of the underground cells in the *NS-Kampfruf*. Since his lecture in Hamburg, the government in Bonn

could arrest only three comrades (without even breaking the cells they belong to!): and this by sticking, NOT by infiltration, breaching our security, traitors, etc. This already says a lot about the correctness of (...) a propagandistic NS underground fight and for the security system of the many cells working INDEPENDENTLY FROM ONE ANOTHER! (Lauck, 1975)

Lauck's statement justified the conclusion that the period between 1973 and 1975 was successful primarily on the three indirect domains of transfer, as shipments of propaganda material indoctrinated the extreme right and inspired it to act. Yet the sense of cohesion did not just exist in Lauck's perception; his efforts truly affected the organizational structure of the extreme right. Reflecting on Lauck's visit in 1974, the right-wing extremist Michael Kühnen, who also cooperated with Lauck in the mid-1970s, wrote that with physically being present, Lauck 'had triggered a new development within the movement: the cells and their leaders, which had previously been strictly separated from each other, got to know each other and began to plan and carry out joint operations' (Kühnen, 1979, p. 37).

So, Lauck's endeavors also paved the way for more direct forms of engagement across the three domains, domestically and transnationally. When Lauck descended from the train onto the platform of Mainz Central Station on 25 March 1976, to embark on his

second ‘visit to the front,’ he was immediately arrested (LG Koblenz, 1976). The swiftness of the arrest implied that Lauck’s impact on the extreme right within West Germany, and hence his relevance for the authorities, was no longer insignificant (Generalbundesanwalt Karlsruhe, 1974). Indeed, as a ‘hard core’ of about 100 older and younger Nazis gradually emerged in West Germany in 1976, Lauck had appointed one of them as the NSDAP/AO’s ‘Reichsleiter für Deutschland und Ostmark’: Paul Otte (Spiegel, 1976). This moment in time marked the next phase of the transnational extremist alliance: direct operational cooperation.

### *The ultimate form of cooperation: talking violence*

The materialization of a direct logistical and operational alliance between Lauck and his Reichsleiter Otte is best explained by the men’s shared belief in the underground struggle and their strategic assessment that the fight against the ban on the NSDAP, and hence against the government unwilling to lift it, should be waged primarily on West German soil (Lepzien, 1976). To further that struggle, Otte smuggled in Lauck’s ‘flowers’ – packages of 20–50 kg containing the NSDAP/AO’s propaganda material – via various land and sea routes (Lauck, 1976b). This shared conviction also explains why Lauck had ‘minimal’ interest in building up a large following in America (Kahn, 2021, p. 96): West Germany was key in the struggle for National Socialism. Additionally, these explanations disclose two elements that accentuated the men’s alliance and Lauck’s wider influence on the West German extreme right between 1976 and 1978. By turning to two meetings that took place between Lauck, Otte, and other right-wing extremists, I will show that the first element put the alliance into the highest echelon of cooperation: that of planning and preparing lethal force. Yet in practice, Lauck repeatedly restrained the use of violence by arguing for its postponement, because in the end, he was reluctant to release control. This related to his desire to dominate the West German right-wing extremist scene. In turn, Lauck’s hesitance created rivalry between him and Otte, the second element that increasingly dominated their cooperation. Apparently without noticing the consequences of his thirst for power, Lauck distanced Otte from him, who had a leadership position within West Germany in mind for himself as well. By examining these elements in the following two sections, I argue that Lauck and Otte’s jockeying for the highest authority within West Germany, while also cementing transnational contact, ultimately drove a wedge between them.

Lauck and Otte’s correspondence showed that throughout 1976 and the first half year of 1977, their alliance transformed from ideological agreement via direct logistical support into a direct operational cooperation, and not just because of Otte’s appointment as Reichsleiter. An important prerequisite for that transformation was mutual trust, which characterized the relationship between Otte and Lauck. When the latter announced his plans to travel to Europe in March 1977, he let Otte know he ‘want[ed] to be able to count on your work being done and you being there’ (Lauck, 1976c).

Alongside such expressions of mutual trust and exchanges about the logistics of smuggling in propaganda, the planning of violent attacks increasingly informed the alliance’s content. In November 1976, Otte had received ‘death lists’ from an NSDAP/AO-companion in Düsseldorf, Kurt Wolfgram Uhl, by mail. The ‘death lists’ contained the addresses of about 1,000 left-wing politicians, alleged Communists, and prominent Germans. Otte

also possessed a 'Jewish version' that listed 600 Jewish individuals and organizations in Germany and beyond (Uhl, 1976). Otte intended to forward the lists to Lauck to contribute to a 'worldwide registration of the so-called enemies of [our] movement' ('Treffbericht', 1977). Both the lists and Otte's intention to mail them to Lauck underscored that shared threat perceptions and goals again formed the foundation for the men's cooperation, just as they had done for Brinkmann and Knauber in 1971-2. In turn, Lauck approved of several inflammatory letters Otte had drafted and subsequently sent to all 'Soldiers of the NSDAP' on Lauck's behalf too ('Treffbericht', 1977). In one of them, Otte called 'for the resistance of the deed': 'After 31 years, every German must realize that inner resistance is not enough. (...) With this appeal we turn to all who feel strength in fist and arm to resist once more' (Otte, 1976b).

When Lauck and Otte discussed what that act of resistance should exactly amount to in Liverpool and Copenhagen in 1976 and 1977 respectively, their direct operational engagement came to include the preparation of violent attacks. In March 1976, Otte met with Lauck and members of the British Movement (BM) in the home of the BM's leader, Michael McLaughlin. The purpose of the meeting was to pick up 1,000 propaganda leaflets and 40,000 NSDAP/AO-stickers as well as to discuss the robbery of a chemical factory near Otte's hometown, to procure gunpowder. Otte had already prepared the crime to perfection, but Lauck ordered him to postpone the action, much to Otte's frustration. At the meeting in Copenhagen in March 1977, Otte planned to have a 'swearing-in ceremony for the so-called "Sonderkommandos,"' for which Lauck had to be present (Lepzien, 1977a). The commandos should carry out detonations throughout West Germany. The archival sources contain no information whether the ceremony actually took place, yet Otte's intention still showed the primacy of Lauck's person and permission in Otte's violent plans to achieve the restoration of the NSDAP. In addition, Lauck himself discussed the possibility of bombing Communists in Schleswig-Holstein and the Berlin wall with several others present. He also promised that he would 'finance part of these explosives at the next meeting' with Otte (Lepzien, 1977c).

So, between the men's evolving correspondence and meetings, their cooperation on the ideological, logistical, and operational domains appeared tight knit, based on a relationship of mutual trust fueled by the sense of a shared purpose. At this point in time, the two elements that characterized the evolving cooperation converged. In Copenhagen, Lauck had explicitly commanded Otte to leave NSDAP/AO-propaganda material at the site of the bomb attacks that were planned on the state border, to prevent any other extremist group from 'adorning itself with borrowed plumes' (Lepzien, 1977c). Moreover, by claiming such transnational operational success, Lauck expected to garner international media attention, to thereby win over 'Ami patrons' who could finance his organization (Lepzien, 1977d). To understand why he did so, and what the consequences were, we now turn to Lauck's personal reasons for meddling on German grounds.

### *Between cooperation and domination: rivalry*

The second element that accentuated the direct operational engagement between Lauck and Otte was the former's desire to dominate the West German right-wing extremist scene through allying with more right-wing extremists. No longer did he just advocate the establishment of independent cells, he now also called for the unification of splinter

groups under the name of the NSDAP/AO to strengthen the underground movement and its finances, power, and clout. Although this move towards unification tied into a more widely supported call for coordination within the German extremist scene (Spiegel, 1976), it also served Lauck's interest of expanding his personal influence. This section will demonstrate that to secure his position of authority within the German right-wing extremist scene, Lauck clung to the argument of organizational security as a pretext to determine what course of action he would allow. Because Lauck's attitude increasingly clashed with Otte's personal ambitions, Otte distanced himself from Lauck. In turn, the strength of their alliance degraded to the logistical domain, although the impression of an operational cooperation was maintained. This process of deterioration began at the meeting in Copenhagen in March 1977, which thus marked both the alliance's strongest moment and the beginning of its ending.

In advance of Lauck's arrival in Copenhagen in 1977, Otte had wanted to impress Lauck by committing violence as 'a man of action' and therefore initially planned to bomb the inner-German border. However, Otte feared being arrested if he were to proceed, thereby missing Lauck's answers to 'organizational questions about the closer cooperation of all the cell leaders,' (Lepzien, 1977b) whom Otte did not know yet. For that reason, he abandoned his plan. Much to his dismay, however, Lauck kept such organizational details to himself. Nor did he honor Otte's request to access his network, which Otte had wanted to use to build up his own network (OLG Celle, 1981). These rejections added insult to injury; it was not the first time that Lauck crossed Otte. When Otte had proposed to build up a European headquarter in England, Sweden, or Denmark, Lauck immediately declined, arguing that 'a large propaganda center cannot remain hidden and will not be tolerated by any European government' (Lauck, 1976b). Although there certainly was truth to the second part of Lauck's answer, Otte's proposal also had some advantages. Otte clearly wanted to intensify the operational cooperation with Lauck and felt that the current channels of communication were cumbersome, whereas a new headquarter nearby would improve the speed of communication and help evade postal controls, thus removing 'a hindrance for planned actions' (Lepzien, 1977a). However, Lauck had also forbidden Otte to publish his own newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. For the foundation of a new newspaper, Lauck (1977) wrote, 'the current one must become much stronger and appear more often. Fragmentation of strength means suicide and defeat.' Lauck used the argument of organizational security and strength to reject Otte's plans and reinforce his own control over the NSDAP/AO. Immediately after the meeting in Copenhagen, Otte was no longer 'unconditionally willing' to carry out Lauck's 'orders'; Otte had unconditionally backed Lauck and therefore expected Lauck to confide in him in return.

As an effect, the strength of the operational ties weakened; Lauck's handling of Otte's requests frustrated Otte to the point of violent escalation. Although the first bomb attack in which Otte was involved still bore Lauck's fingerprints on it – they had discussed it in Copenhagen and the attack thus was the result of their direct operational cooperation – Otte increasingly alluded to his own independence. In June 1977, Otte and Lepzien returned from a four-day trip to Switzerland with 800 grams of gunpowder to build several bombs. Two months later and without Lauck's authorization, Otte handed over one bomb to a member of the Gruppe Eisermann (Group Eisermann) on his way to pick up propaganda material in Denmark. Otte showed the man how to light the fuse with a

cigar and discussed potential targets with him (OLG Celle, 1981). On September 2, in the depth of the night, the man snuck up to the front of the prosecutor's office in Flensburg, planted a bomb at the building, and threw in a gas canister, hoping to set the building alight. He aimed to attack the local prosecutor who had filed charges against another right-wing extremist, Manfred Roeder. The attack's impact far surpassed the damage it did. In the subsequent trial, the court judged that the perpetrator had 'effectively wanted to hit the state,' because the 'judiciary was supposed to be terrorized in order to keep it from convicting right-wing extremist criminals' (Manthe, 2021, pp. 7-8; LG Flensburg, 1983). With that, transnationally discussed violence had been successfully executed.

Shortly after the successful attack, another plot confirmed the growing willingness of Otte and other NSDAP/AO-affiliates to resort to violent means. On 1 October 1977, Otte had invited Michael Kühnen, the NSDAP/AO-leader from Hamburg, two members of the NSDAP/AO-cell in Hanover, and others to a meeting in Lepzien's house. While the men nibbled away on sandwiches and drank bottles of beer, Otte took two pipe-bombs from a plastic bag he had brought along. He handed one of each over to Kühnen and the neo-Nazis from Hanover and explained the bombs' mechanism (OLG Celle, 1981). Although Kühnen claimed he defused the bomb by detonating it at a safe location, one of the Hanoverian neo-Nazis used his bomb to attack the district court in Hanover, in imitation of the Gruppe Eisermann, only three weeks later. Both bomb attacks demonstrated that violence increasingly constituted a viable form of political action to the right-wing extremists to pressure the state into releasing fellow extremists or lifting the ban on the NSDAP. They succeeded not just in stockpiling weapons and high explosives, but in actually executing attacks from the underground.<sup>3</sup>

The nature of the objects assaulted also underlined that the extremists' violence was highly targeted and corresponded to their political worldview. Attacks discussed between Otte and Lauck on the inner-German border, East German cargo ships and trains, and transit traffic fitted in the international wave of anti-communist violence (Hart, 2021). Within West Germany, the plans reacted above all to the government's policy to normalize diplomatic relations with East Germany and other Eastern European states (*neue Ostpolitik*) pursued since 1969. The extreme right perceived this rapprochement to the Soviet Union as close contact with the 'Bolshevik enemy' (Manthe, 2020, p. 70), which thus required armed resistance. In addition, the targeting of Jewish shops with propaganda material and the plans to attack war memorial sites and prominent Germans who either represented the state and its juridical apparatus or symbolized the nation-wide process of coming to terms with the past, such as judge Fritz Bauer or Simon Wiesenthal, who hunted down Nazi criminals (Manthe, 2020), aligned with the extreme right's historical revisionism that simply relegated the Holocaust to the realm of lies and conspiracies. Both target selections again underlined the union of anti-Semitic and anti-Communist threat perceptions.

The direct operational cooperation between Otte and Lauck was not just negatively affected by the growing imbalance between the men's personal ambitions and mutual trust, but also by Lauck's inability to enter West Germany after his arrest and subsequent deportation from the country in 1976. This increasingly inhibited his capacity to guide the NSDAP/AO and deepened the emerging division between Lauck and Otte. The impact of Lauck's absence crystallized at a meeting of the neo-Nazi leadership (*Führungstreffen*) of the NSDAP/AO's highest leaders in West Germany in the last days of 1977, which in itself

was the outcome of the increased will to coordinate the neo-Nazi struggle. Exactly at these moments, the neo-Nazis strengthened social cohesion and took organizational decisions. After a night of singing old battle songs and playing 'the new National Socialist parlor game, the so-called burning of the Jews to get to know each other' (Lepzien, 1979), the extremists altered the alliance on several fronts under Otte's guidance.<sup>4</sup> The clearest expression of the alliance's erosion emerged on the operational level. Whereas the extremists maintained the organization's acronym, they altered the meaning of the letters 'AO' from 'Auslands-' to 'Aufbauorganisation,' thus from 'foreign' to 'development organization,' to signal their assertion of autonomy (Kühnen, 1979, p. 37). Strategically, Otte and the others agreed that members of the NSDAP/AO should not claim responsibility for any act of violence. This strategical modification related to the violence the RAF had used since September 1977. Otte wanted to disguise right-wing extremist violence in order to pin the blame on left-wing adversaries (OLG Celle, 1981).

In August 1978, the imbalance between personal ambition and mutual trust trumped the alliance's foundation of shared threat perceptions and a common sense of purpose, when Lauck found out the full extent of Otte's autonomous activities. Pointing at Otte's furtive actions, Lauck wrote Otte a letter and accused him of 'various misconducts.' In turn, Otte 'tore up the letter (...), saying that he would not answer Lauck, that the letter was proof that Lauck was crazy, and that was the end of [it]' (Lepzien, 1979). In more ways than one, that moment indeed marked the end of the relationship between Lauck and Otte, although the logistical cooperation initially continued. Still asserting his role as Reichsleiter but effectively acting on his own initiative, Otte paid his right-hand Lepzien 150 DM to deliver a 'big bomb' with which Otte planned to attack a Jewish community center in Hanover in November 1978. Otte's intention fully revealed his personal ambitions; he wanted to 'make a big impact' at the next *Führungstreffen* in early December (Lepzien, 1979). Lepzien, who had been looking for a way out of the extreme right, informed the police on the whereabouts of the bomb. Upon finding the bomb behind a double wall in Otte's toilet, the police arrested Otte on 29 November 1978. The toilet bomb marked the dissolution of Otte's group and the definite end of the cooperation between Lauck and his violent, 'illegal arm' in West Germany (Kühnen, 1982, p. 50).

## Conclusion

This paper showed that the transnational connections between Knauber, Lauck, and Otte transformed from indirect to direct cooperation while evolving across the ideological, logistical, and operational domains. Knauber and Otte established contact with their American counterparts through postal correspondence that matured into propaganda and financial support, and eventually transformed into a high-quality operational cooperation when Otte became Lauck's man on the ground. As argued, the cooperation materialized through the shared interest of restoring National Socialism in West Germany first and to conquer the world second. Underlining the necessity of that restoration was the perceived threat on which, like fertile ground, the American and German extremists grew their connection: the fight against alleged Jewish world domination, which equally found its expression in anti-Communist frames. To maintain this transnationally shared worldview, the distribution of the *NS-Kampfruf* and other NSDAP/AO propaganda material played a crucial role. So, these shared convictions became both the result and the



input of the transnational exchange, as its purpose was to advance their shared ideological agenda and to streamline strategic practices to achieve National Socialist rule, supported by financial and propagandistic transactions.

The paper also showed that the alliance was of a high quality, because it was located primarily in the direct tier of transnational cooperation while spanning all domains. The cooperation between Lauck and Otte reached a high in 1976-7, with the meeting in Copenhagen as its zenith given the violent plans discussed and later executed. At this moment, the three domains of cooperation converged and resulted in political violence, even when the rivalry between the men increasingly disturbed their transatlantic engagement. That rivalry eventually ended their cooperation tied into a major shortcoming of right-wing extremists in post-war Germany: not the lack of willpower, nor the lack of resources, but the lack of a recognized leader.

If Lauck did not manage to establish himself as the new Führer, what, then, was the lasting impact of his cooperation with Otte on the historical trajectory of the German extreme right? As argued, Lauck created social cohesion and energized the extreme right of mid-1970s through his propaganda and his visits. Yet the extremists perceived his influence as going beyond that, as Michael Kühnen contended in his manifesto *Die Zweite Revolution*. Without Lauck, Kühnen (1979) wrote, there would have been 'no organization, no propaganda material, no concept, simply nothing: except for a few fanatical young National Socialists who ventured into their apparently hopeless work' (p. 37). So, Lauck and Otte, as his man on the ground, restrengthened neo-Nazism in West Germany up to the point that it could again 'be taken seriously' (Kühnen, 1979, p. 37).

Looking beyond Kühnen's flattery of Lauck, the analysis of the cooperation reveals two important developments within the West German extreme right. Compared to the bilateral connections Knauber maintained with Brinkmann in 1972, the increased amount of (trans-)national connections between Otte and Lauck, and also between them, other West German extremists, and organizations such as the British Movement, demonstrate that a process of multi-lateralization had occurred in the course of the 1970s. The fight for National Socialism had become increasingly coordinated, to which the *Führungstreffen* led by Otte attested. In addition, this phase of transnational cooperation demonstrated that Lauck contributed to the resource mobilization of German right-wing extremists. As Lauck facilitated propaganda shipments, Otte and others could smuggle in propaganda material and establish contact with various extremists abroad, while they evaded both postal and border control. Put differently, they could increasingly take part in an international collective of neo-Nazis. As such, the alliance illuminated, from a transnational angle, the professionalization of the West German extreme right in the 1970s; a process that would lead to the first casualties of right-wing terrorism in West Germany in 1980.

Alongside contributions of an empirical and conceptual nature, this paper has put forward an analytical framework to qualify the types of right-wing extremist transnational exchange and cooperation. Future research can use the framework to analyze other nodes of the loosely organized network of right-wing extremists in the 1970s, such as the British Movement that was actively connected to Otte and other German extremists or apply it to other phases of right-wing extremist activity.

The cooperation of right-wing extremists in the past should worry us in the present too. In light of the recent right-wing extremist terrorist attacks across the globe, this case study underlines that today's right-wing extremists operate within a larger, historical



tradition of transnational cooperation. Although mechanisms for extremist networking have expanded with the rise of the Internet, their purposes remained the same: to advance agendas of hate and violent exclusion. But the transnational character of contemporary right-wing extremism does not exclusively depend on the benefits of digital means of communication. This is exemplified by the Christchurch shooter, who travelled throughout Europe before going online, where his activities deepened his already existing political views (Young, 2020). Yet, maintaining analytical distinctions between the online-offline divide obscures the fact that both realms reinforce each other (Campion & Poynting, 2021); it blurs our understanding of right-wing radicalization in the digital age. To mitigate that effect, historical insights into offline transnational transfers and exchange should complement the study of present-day online right-wing extremism, to better understand the contemporary dynamics of right-wing extremism.

## Notes

1. In this paper, the terms extreme right and right-wing extremism are used interchangeably. The ideology is defined 'the support for violence as a political strategy and the natural inequality between races, ethnicities, cultures, or other collective identities' (Koehler, 2020, p. 4).
2. This course of action nuances several studies that argued that Lauck had 'imported' his thoughts into *Das Banner* (Horchem, 1982; Jensen, 1993; Koehler, 2016; Rosen, 1989). Rather, it was the other way around: Knauber imported his thoughts into Brinkmann's *NS-Kurier*, which was subsequently sent and distributed throughout West Germany.
3. Other examples include the Kühnen-Schulte-Wegener Gruppe that equally mobilized in late 1977. See Manthe, 2020.
4. Paper strips were marked with Jewish stars and the word Jew was also drawn on them, and heads were painted on them, and these strips were then set on fire in an ashtray' (Lepzien, 1979).

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