**Hate**

**Stories about the far right**

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**Prologue**

‘The revolution will not be televised’, according to Gil Scott-Heron’s famous, satirical song of the same name. Yet when supporters of President Donald Trump stormed the United States Capitol on 6 January 2021, not only was it shown on TV, with images that shocked the whole world. It was also live-streamed by the rioters themselves, via a range of different social media platforms. One of these was the so-called walkie-talkie app Zello. On the channel named ‘Stop the Steal J6’, run by a man who simply called himself ‘1% Watchdog’, American activists on the extreme right fired each other up. Some of them participated from their own homes, while others were in the thick of it in Washington DC.

An audio recording from the Zello group chat was later published by the podcast *On The Media*. The recording is almost two and a half hours long, and it provides a fascinating insight into the revolutionary fantasies of the American far right. The storming of Congress is portrayed as an attempt to prevent a crime – what they believe is a stolen election. Trump’s vice president Mike Pence is accused of being a traitor over and over again, simply because he had refused to stop the formal certification of Joe Biden’s electoral victory.

A fair amount of paranoia also crops up on the channel, such as claims that Antifa activists on the radical left had infiltrated ‘the patriots’ at the Capitol Building. At times there are calls for peaceful behaviour, but the violent fantasies are often repeated. ‘CNN just said that they evacuated all members of Congress into a safety room,’ says one of the rioters. ‘There’s no safe place in the United States for any of these motherfuckers right now,’ another one replies. ‘I hope they understand we’re not joking around,’ says a woman.

‘Trump just tweeted,’ says a man, who then provides the message: ‘Please support our Capitol Police. They are on our side, do not harm them.’ This is a rather inaccurate version of the tweet. Trump had expressed his support for the police, but also asked the protesters to continue behaving peacefully. This was in itself a paradox. At this point the protesters had already forced entry into the Capitol Building from various directions. Some of them were shouting that Mike Pence should be hanged. Inside the building they had made their way to a door leading to the House of Representatives Chamber. The door was barricaded, but many of the rioters tried to force it open all the same. The police opened fire, and one of the protesters, Ashli Babbit, was fatally injured. ‘The storm is here,’ she had posted on Twitter the previous day. This was a reference to the final showdown that she believed was coming.

On the Zello channel, the inaccurate rendition of Trump’s tweet was quickly interpreted as an acceptance of the use of violence. ‘That says a lot, what he didn’t say. He didn’t say shit about not doing anything to the members of Congress,’ laughs a male voice. Soon afterwards another voice is heard from inside the building. It is Afghanistan veteran and bar owner Jessica Watkins, a member of the Oath Keepers militia group: ‘We are rocking it,’ she says. ‘They’re throwing grenades and fricking shooting people with paintballs, but we’re in here.’

Other participants in the Zello chat wish her luck. ‘Well, I guess they’re gonna realise now that the American patriots and the American people are not going to put up with this illegal bullshit they’re pulling and trying to get Slow Joe in there,’ one of them says. ‘Hang them sonofabitches,’ says another. ‘It is time for good men to do bad shit to corrupt politicians,’ adds a third voice.

The atmosphere was partly hateful. It was also partly triumphant.

But then things changed. As the enraged protesters were forced back out of the Capitol Building, a feeling of defeat seemed to sink in. ‘So do we give up now?’ a woman asks. The channel host says that it would take more than this to drain the swamp, a direct reference to a catchphrase Trump started using before the election in 2016. ‘Welcome to the new, communist United States of America,’ says another rioter. ‘They’re not getting in my kids, they’re not force-vaccin[at]ing me, I’m not going to be lockdowned, and [….] if I die in this country, I die a free woman.’ The channel host replies: ‘I thought it would take longer, but we’ve reached the post-democracy era, where our vote doesn’t count for shit in this republic and you have a totalitarian regime, totalitarian state, total power of the Democrats.’

Then the conspiracy theories resurface once more. ‘I believe this may have been a set-up’ says one of the rioters. ‘It was Antifa that did this,’ declares someone else.

**Spring in Berlin**

27 May 2018: ‘Where is true freedom?’ asks the master of ceremonies. He is standing on a stage at Washingtonplatz, just in front of Berlin’s main train station. ‘Where can we freely express our views?’ he shouts.

I am one of five thousand people who have turned out for a demonstration that the radical right party Alternative für Deutschland (Alternative for Germany, AfD) has been publicising for months. According to them, this is a demonstration ‘for the future of Germany’, a future they believe to be jeopardised by Chancellor Angela Merkel and her government. ‘Where can life be free from tyranny?’ asks the master of ceremonies on the stage. He praises the crowd for standing up against ‘the dictatorship of opinion’. ‘Resistance, resistance, resistance,’ the protesters shout out in response.

At a press conference prior to the demonstration, the AfD politician Georg Pazderski has just explained that many Germans are reluctant to face the truth, and that the AfD will take to the streets to wake the country up. His fellow party member Guido Reil, a former social democrat, said it was only in Alternative für Deutschland that a simple miner like himself could be elected to the party leadership. According to Reil, the AfD reflected the average German. ‘We are the people’s party,’ he said.

That was not how it all began. The AfD was founded in a community hall in Oberusel, a town in the federal state of Hesse, in the spring of 2013. It was dubbed the ‘party of professors’ early on. The founders were a small group that had formed around the economics professor Bernd Lucke, and initially they became known for their criticism of the European monetary union. This position was not least motivated by the so-called euro crisis, which was caused by the unstable public finances of several southern European countries.

The AfD came into being as a Eurosceptic, conservative party. Several of its founders were disgruntled defectors from the Christian Democratic Union of Germany. While at times there were nationalistic overtones to the party’s Euroscepticism, there was no exclusionary nationalism. The party leadership didn’t want anything to do with prominent figures on the European far right, such as Marine Le Pen of France and Geert Wilders of the Netherlands. Nor were they particularly pleased when their own youth party invited the British politician Nigel Farage – a staunch opponent of the EU – to come and visit.

The party now assembled at Washingtonplatz has become a different kind of party. Lucke left the AfD back in 2015, and even then expressed the view that the party had fallen into the wrong hands. Continuing in the AfD would involve serving as a ‘middle-class figurehead’ for the ideas he opposed: anti-Western attitudes, pro-Russian sympathies, xenophobia and a fundamental distrust of the political system. The AfD had become ‘a party for enraged citizens,’ he said.

I look around. Are all these people Guido Reil’s average Germans? The crowd is certainly a motley crew. But it is also predominately male, white and has a higher average age than the counter-protesters who have gathered in Spreebogenpark on the other side of the river.

I see banners declaring that Islam has no place in Europe. I see others portraying Angela Merkel as a dictator, no less, and demanding that she should be arrested. A speaker leaves the stage and while waiting for the next one, the crowd starts shouting again. Soon they are chanting in unison: ‘*Merkel muss weg*,’ they shout, ‘Merkel must go.’ Over and over. I feel like I’m at some kind of festival of discontent. There is rage in the air. It makes me feel uneasy and I withdraw to the edge of the crowd. Then I see the television cameras. The media attention around the AfD’s big demonstration is considerable. That comes as no surprise.

For a long time Germany was an exception in Western Europe. Radical right parties appeared in country after country from the 1970s onwards, but in Germany none of the attempts to clear the five per cent hurdle for parliamentary representation at an election succeeded. Until the AfD managed it. In 2017 the party won a staggering 12.7 per cent of the national vote and could thus take their seats in the Bundestag. Some of the credit for this was due to the party’s new leader, Frauke Petry, who had stood on a platform of anti-immigration and anti-Islamic views.

However, Petry also supported a kind of pragmatic national conservatism. She sought to draw a clear line between the AfD and the extreme right, and wanted to get rid of radicals like Björn Höcke, a leading figure in the party’s state branch in Thuringia. It was a contest she lost. In September 2017 she broke with the AfD. ‘When all is said and done, you have to be able to look at yourself in the mirror,’ she said.

Where I am standing there is a sea of German and AfD flags, and also the so-called Wirmer flag, which at first glance resembles the Norwegian one. It has a yellow and black cross against a red background. This flag actually originates from the anti-Nazi resistance movement in Nazi Germany, but since the 1990s it has become a symbol of the extreme right in German politics, a symbol of their ‘resistance struggle’. Amongst those who have embraced it is the German anti-Muslim movement Pegida, ‘Patriotic Europeans Against the Islamisation of the West’. Pegida supporters are present at the demonstration. So are members of the anti-immigrant vigilante group Soldiers of Odin, as well as a number of so-called *Identitarians*. These are part of an ultra-nationalist movement that attempts to present its views as a youth rebellion, while at the same time being obsessed with ethnic identity, in both the cultural and genetic sense of the word.

Someone stuffs a rather strange flyer in my hand. When I examine it more closely, I realise that it comes from a group within the so-called *Reichsbürger* movement. This organisation consists of several groups united by the simple fact that they regard the modern German state as an illegitimate occupying power. The real, true German state is still the German Reich, perhaps the German Reich from 1871, perhaps the Weimar Republic from 1919, only occasionally the ‘Third Reich’ of National Socialism. They often support historical and territorial revisionism as well as conspiracy theories, including antisemitic ones.

I catch sight of someone waving a gigantic Israeli flag nearby. This symbolises the changes that have taken place within the European far right, how the antisemitism of the past has been replaced by anti-Muslim sentiment, often dressed up in Israel’s blue and white colours. Yet above all, it is perhaps a sign that everything goes at the festival of discontent.

The air is quivering. With rage. And with hate. The crowd responds to something said on stage with ‘Traitors of the people,’ and the uneasy feeling inside me grows. I decide to cross the Spree to get a closer look at the counter-protesters instead. There is a heavy police presence on the footbridge over the river, and this heightens my sense of passing from one political reality to another. Having reached the other side of the river, I fail to notice that the AfD supporters are singing the German folk song *Die Gedanken sind frei* (Thoughts Are Free), before their previously announced protest march gets underway. I also fail to notice the man who is trying to urge people to join in a rallying cry that would normally be chanted at Pegida demonstrations: ‘Merkel to Siberia, Putin to Berlin’. It is social media that make me aware of these things, because the demonstration in Berlin has attracted considerable attention on digital platforms.

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Memories from this demonstration in May 2018 have remained with me. Reading that the AfD had moved a long way to the right is one thing, but it was something else again to experience it, to see the blurred lines between the AfD and extreme groups, to get a flyer stuffed in my hand from an organisation that doesn’t even acknowledge the existence of the Federal Republic of Germany. Feeling the quiver of hate at the festival of discontent made a powerful impression on me. The unease I felt when the cries of treason resounded over the Spree has come back to haunt me on several occasions.

In retrospect I have started to think of it all as a kind of foreshadowing. A foreshadowing of how far-right groups exploited the widespread resentment of pandemic restrictions. A warning about 6 January 2021, when the US Capitol was stormed, an incident that not only reminded me of Berlin because far-right groups took part in it, but also because these groups were not *alone* – they were part of a furious mob. The unease also returned with Donald Trump’s comeback, and with radical right parties winning elections in one country after the other in Europe.

The Dutch political scientist Cas Mudde has written about four waves of far-right politics since the Second World War.

The first wave, which lasted until the mid-1950s, consisted of neo-fascists who didn’t really have anything new to offer. They were faithful to the old ideas, enjoyed little popular support, and whenever they attempted to run for office they were rarely elected – with the partial exception of the Italian post-war fascists in Movimento Sociale Italiano, who won seats in the Italian parliament as early as 1948.

The second wave, which lasted until 1980, consisted of people Mudde describes as right-wing populists, political movements that emerged in opposition to the post-war period’s new elites. Here Mudde points in particular to the so-called Poujadism movement in France, which arose from a tax protest and was actually Jean-Marie Le Pen’s path into politics. He also refers to Mogens Glistrup, the Dane who founded Fremskridtspartiet (the Progress Party), and to Anders Lange, the Norwegian usually credited with founding the equivalent party in Norway. According to Mudde, these parties can best be described as ‘neo-liberal populist parties, however, railing against high taxes and big government’. At the same time, there also appeared what he calls hybrid parties, ones that combined old and new right-wing radicalism, often centred around opposition to immigration. In this connection he mentions the German NPD and the British National Front, movements that today are largely forgotten.

The third wave consists of parties that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Mudde mentions, for example, Vlaams Blok in Belgium and Front National in France, two parties that have since changed their names.

The fourth wave came with the new millennium. Far-right parties benefitted from three different crises: terrorist attacks from 2001 onwards, the financial crisis in 2008 and the refugee crisis in 2015. ‘What characterizes the fourth wave, and distinguishes it from the third, is the mainstreaming of the far right,’ writes Mudde. He highlights the fact that radical right parties in an increasing number of countries are regarded as acceptable coalition partners by parties on the traditional right, and sometimes even by parties on the left. He says that radical right – and occasionally even extreme right – sentiments are openly discussed in the mainstream debate, and that other parties are adopting radical right policies, though in a slightly more moderate form.

This normalisation of the parliamentary far right is one of four trends I will examine in this book. The far right has now become part of established politics in various countries. The walls between traditional conservatism and the radical right have crumbled. What is striking is that in some places this has happened at the same time as the far right has become more radical itself. Another trend is the import of ideas from an ever more divided USA. The United States is a cultural power, and ideas from the American far right keep taking root in Europe. A third trend is fraternisation, whereby different groups come together in a distrust of the establishment and a faith in conspiracy theory narratives. This is what happened in connection with the coronavirus pandemic, for example, which only strengthened the far right. In the background lurks the idea of decline, a sense that society is on the brink of collapse. This idea is often closely intertwined with modern right-wing radicalism, which claims to want to halt the decline. It also constitutes the core of so-called accelerationism, the most pronounced extreme right terror threat of recent years, which aims to hasten this collapse by any means necessary.

**Snapshots**

**I**

A story can begin in various places. This one begins on 14 July 2002, in a rental car on the way in to Paris from the suburb of Courcouronnes.

Inside the car sat a dark-haired young man called Maxime Brunerie. His favourite track was playing on the car stereo, a sort of punk rock song with fast drumming, distorted guitar noises and aggressive vocals. ‘Street-fighting force, of white men, of course,’ sang the vocalist. This song is the title track of an album that came out a few years earlier by the band Razor’s Edge. Most people were totally unfamiliar with this band even then. Among neo-Nazis like Brunerie, however, it was a different matter. Razor’s Edge was part of the so-called Rock Against Communism movement. The song Brunerie was playing was a homage to the violent, British neo-Nazi group Combat 18, which according to the lyrics made Zion – the Jews, in other words – tremble. ‘A new path is laid, no democratic way,’ the vocalist yelled over the car stereo, and Maxime Brunerie’s thoughts turned to what was going to happen that Sunday. Then he changed the music, from Nazi punk to the Rolling Stones: ‘I see a red door, and I want it painted black’.

Several acquaintances of Maxime Brunerie had noticed a change in him over the preceding weeks. He had previously been known as tight-fisted. Now he had suddenly invited his friends to a restaurant, bought expensive sunglasses and even offered to pay for a train ticket for a mate who was going on holiday. ‘I’ve inherited some money,’ he had claimed, ‘and now I’ve got enough for the rest of my life.’ In reality Brunerie had planned to die. But he had also planned to kill first. In the car with him he had his father’s old, worn guitar case. There was no guitar inside, just a brand-new rifle. The weapon was actually a little too long, so the end of the barrel stuck out. He had covered it with a plastic bag from a supermarket.

The day before his planned last trip, Brunerie had left a message in English on Combat 18’s website: ‘Watch television on Sunday, I will be the star,’ he had written. And then: ‘Death to ZOG, 88!’ ZOG is a reference to an anti-Jewish conspiracy theory that actually originated in the United States. It claims that we are controlled – more or less covertly – by a ‘Zionist Occupation Government’. The number 88 is a kind of code from the same neo-Nazi ideological universe, as are the digits in Combat 18. The number 1 stands for the letter A, and the number 8 for the letter H, which together makes AH or Adolf Hitler. 88 stands for HH: Heil Hitler.

Maxime Brunerie knew these codes. The young man in the rental car had been active on the French extreme right for years. He had taken part in demonstrations organised by the micro party Parti nationaliste français et européen (The French and European Nationalist Party, PNFE), a party known for its slogan ‘France first, white always’. He had also run for office in another micro party, Mouvement national républicain (National Republican Movement, MNR). This was started by Bruno Mégret, who had broken with the country’s leading radical right party, Front National (National Front, FN).

In addition, Brunerie had been active in Unité Radicale, a youth-oriented group with ties to the MNR. Racism and antisemitism were mixed together here with a fundamental anti-Americanism, which in itself was not an unusual combination on the French extreme right. ‘France must win back its independence,’ stated Unité Radicale’s political platform. But also: ‘New European politics must involve the building of a European empire open to the east and Eurasia, no longer a supermarket, a European appendage to Washington.’