



# How Far Right Extremists Exploited the Coronavirus Crisis

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## Introduction

COVID-19 has offered a unique opportunity for far right entities to capitalize on the pandemic and thereby advance their malicious agenda. Accordingly, lockdown protests provided the extreme right-wing a convenient avenue to recruit new members, amplify its presence, and agitate public unrest. There has been a continued interest in bioterrorism, resulting in threats against ethnic minorities, and at the same time, these threat groups have aimed to exacerbate pressure on healthcare and other critical services. Arson attacks on 5G infrastructure, misinformation campaigns, and circulated conspiracy theories were all part of their strategy to take advantage of the extraordinary crisis and aggravate social instability.

To gain a better understanding of how the associated threat has evolved since the pandemic outbreak, this chapter examines far right operations, incitements, and propaganda activities between 11 March and 31 July 2020 on both the European and the American continent. Our understanding is based on an investigation of extremist right-wing narratives, which provide insights into the very recent operational circumstances and strategies far right threat groups have employed. Proceedings in the Australian and New Zealand-based right-wing extremists' activities are detailed in the concluding section of this chapter.

## Far Right Operations

One extreme right-wing operation occurred on both the European and the American continent that had direct links to the pandemic. Timothy R. Wilson, a neo-Nazi from Missouri, was suspected of planning to attack a Missouri hospital and was killed during a shootout with FBI agents on 26 March 2020. Later, on 29 June 2020, German anarchists targeted a vehicle belonging to WISAG, a German service company in

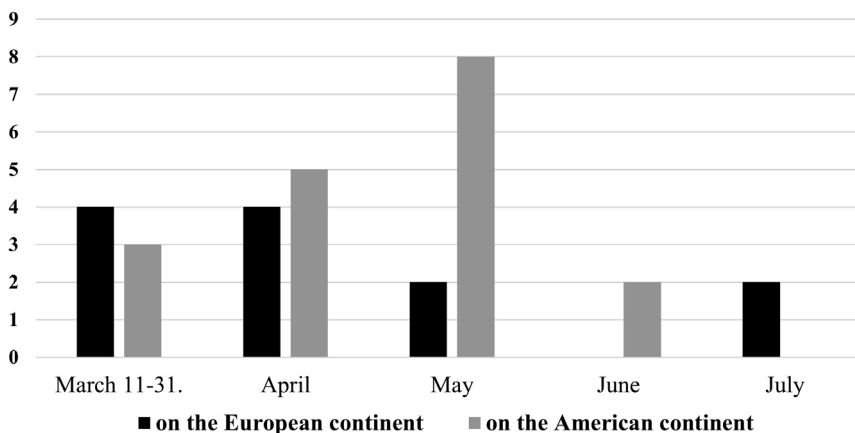
Berlin, claiming that it had assisted government “repression” during the pandemic (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

### Far Right Incitements

From March until July 2020, far right extremists operating on the European continent disseminated twelve posts inciting violence. Meanwhile, those on the American continent incited eighteen pandemic-related violent acts. Investigating the temporal distribution of these incitements, March and April were the most active periods for the European entities, while their American counterparts showed more activity in April and May 2020.

Most of these incidents urged followers to commit armed assault. Accordingly, in March 2020, neo-Nazi posts called for violent acts on cities, critical infrastructure, members of the military force, and black Americans (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). In accordance with a far right belief in the “FEMA Camp” conspiracy theory, threats against FEMA agents were disseminated. The theory, which dates back to the 1980s, postulates that the United States Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) intends to imprison US citizens in concentration camps following a major crisis (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). Simultaneously, neo-Nazi discussions on 4chan—an anonymous imageboard website—and Telegram—an encrypted instant messaging service—encouraged armed resistance in the face of the government pandemic

**COVID-19-related far right incitements I.**



**Figure 3.1.** COVID-19-related far right incitements I. © Katalin Pethő-Kiss.

crackdown. Meanwhile, white supremacists urged supporters to conduct acts of violence and infrastructural sabotage as an accelerationist response to authorities enforcing coronavirus mitigation and lockdown procedures across the United States. The anarchist group *Contra Media* issued a statement that called for Argentines to take up arms and “embrace revolutionary action” because of COVID-19 restrictions on 29 June 2020. Later, in July 2020, a user on Telegram group chat affiliated with the neo-Nazi group “VR” posted messages claiming to have attended recent protests in Belgrade and engaged in a violent confrontation with law enforcement (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

A slightly lower number of incitements encouraged members either to organize or to participate in lockdown protests. A 28 April 2020 Telegram post was disseminated among alt-right and far right channels promoting a series of “massive anti-lockdown protests across the US on 1 May 2020.” Andrew Anglin, a prominent white nationalist, praised armed demonstrators in Michigan’s state capitol. In May the Philadelphia chapter of the Proud Boys promoted upcoming quarantine protests in the city. A video was released on 15 May 2020 by the Russian far right organization “Nation and Freedom” Committee (KNS) in which a masked individual discussed the potential for protest actions in Novosibirsk, Russia (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Besides the aforementioned, outlets intended to encourage members to prepare for violent acts. In line with this, far right forums urged supporters to organize militias in major US cities, and videos were propagated showing members engaged in various types of training to encourage others to “develop new skills.” The Russian white nationalist group *Imperial Legion* posted a statement on its official VK page on 7 April 2020 urging its members to “[pray, train, and prepare]” for the crisis (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

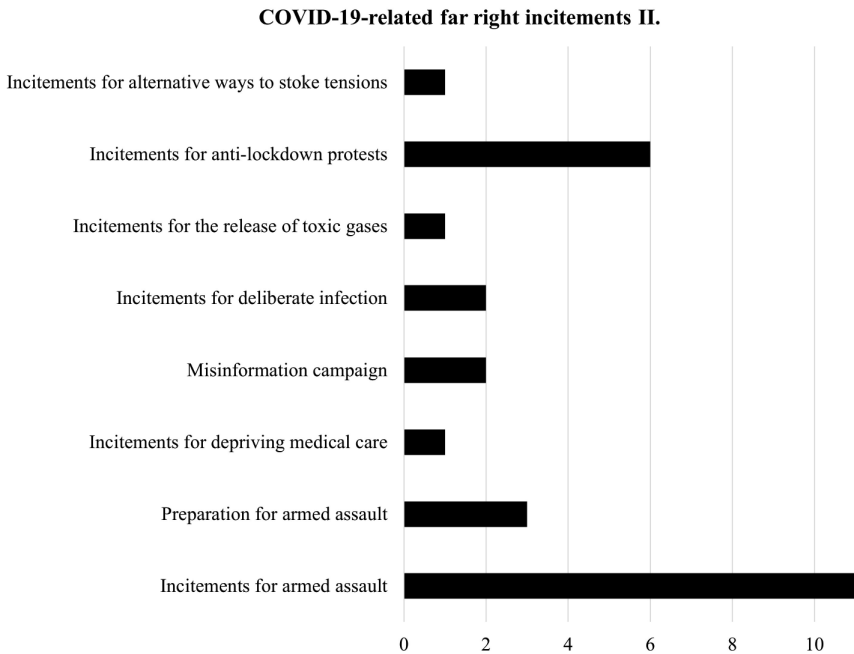
Only a minor fraction of incitements called for deliberate infections. On 1 April 2020, neo-Nazi Telegram channels (“NAR” and “SMS”) distributed a statement that asserted a “hypothetical 28-year-old lone wolf domestic terrorist” could ship coronavirus-infected products to countries with “high population densities and large but unstable economies” as a biological weapon to “expedite worldwide economic collapse.” Drawing on the devastation of the Black Plague, on 11 July 2020 the accelerationist neo-Nazi Telegram channel “SSS,” with almost 4,300 subscribers, claimed that the coronavirus would be capable of similar havoc. This communication contained an image detailing the necessary materials and instructions to build a “poison fragmentation grenade,” which would be more effective if deployed “in countries with lower hygiene standards, less developed healthcare facilities, and a higher pop-

ulation density.” In a call for acts of bioterrorism, a recruitment poster was released on 18 May 2020 by the neo-Nazi “Waldkrieg Division” urging followers to intentionally infect “non-whites” with COVID-19 (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Far right communications also offered alternative ways to accelerate public strains. Accordingly, prominent neo-Nazi Telegram channels urged their followers in 5 May 2020 posts to avoid lockdown protests and encouraged alternative ways to “stoke tensions.” Simultaneously, an image depicting toxic combinations of household chemicals was distributed by a neo-Nazi Telegram channel suggesting that toxic gases should be released in busy grocery stores. Symptoms resulting from the attack would mimic COVID-19 and send hundreds of people into an already overburdened healthcare system (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

The overwhelming majority of far right incitements involved targeting public spaces and the general public. Calls for armed assault and anti-lockdown protests all aimed to induce public fear and intensify the general panic.

On the American continent, Michigan’s state governor and the Argentinean government were the targets against which extremists articulated incitements. Additionally, biowarfare was planned against Trump

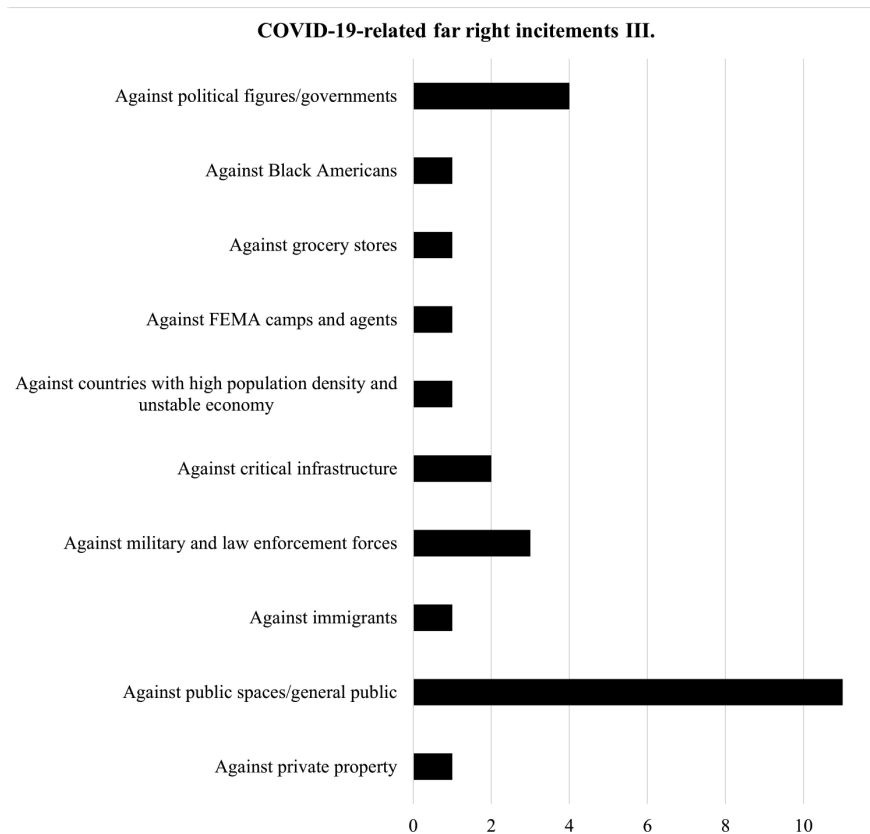


**Figure 3.2.** COVID-19-related far right incitements II. © Katalin Pethő-Kiss.

rally events in Tulsa, with a Telegram post that called for COVID-positive individuals to “assemble” outside Tulsa’s BOK Convention Center. A supposed “parody” poster distributed by “The Fellow Nationalist” neo-Nazi Telegram channel showed an edited image of *Kill Bill* actress Uma Thurman with a far right-styled facemask and illuminated eyes. The text read “KILL BILL GATES” and was followed up with “IN MINE-CRAFT” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Following the declared COVID-19 national emergency, on 25 March 2020 neo-Nazi Telegram channel “EFC” posted several statements inciting violence against members of the military and law enforcement. In May 2020, far right discussions on 4chan and Telegram channels called for direct action against law enforcement officials (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

There were also inciteful statements calling for attacks on critical infrastructure. A March post by the neo-Nazi group “Vorherrschaft Divi-



**Figure 3.3.** COVID-19-related far right incitements III. © Katalin Pethő-Kiss.

sion” (VD) incited followers to attack “transportation structures, power lines, water towers, bridges, railroads, and grocery stores.” The prominent neo-Nazi Telegram channel “SSS” encouraged acts of violence and infrastructural sabotage as an accelerationist response to US authorities on 22 May 2020 (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

In addition, private property, immigrants, countries with a high population density but unstable economy, FEMA camps and agents, grocery stores as well as black Americans were addressed by other far right incitements (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

### Far Right Propaganda Activities

In total, far right entities operating on the American continent disseminated altogether twenty-six posts, while Europeans only eighteen posts. Figure 3.4 indicates that the overwhelming majority of propaganda activities were related to spreading conspiracy theories. Only a very small amount of far right propaganda was explicitly about recruiting new

COVID-19-related far right propaganda activities

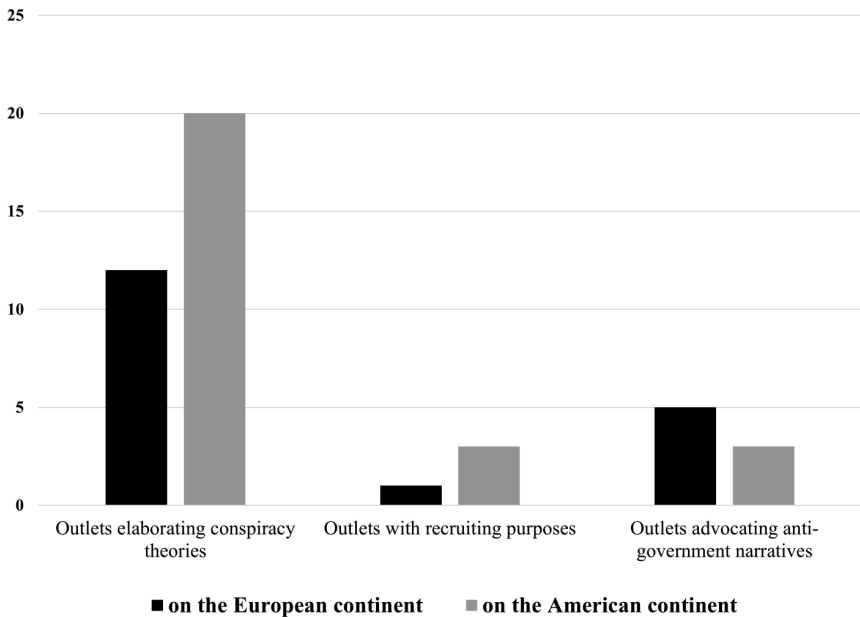


Figure 3.4. COVID-19-related far right propaganda activities.

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members. Interestingly, an insignificant number of outlets advocated straightforward antigovernment narratives.

## **Communication Outlets Elaborating Conspiracy Theories**

After investigating far right accounts, the following main narratives were propagated on the examined forums. Firstly, concerted anti-Chinese propaganda occurred. In March a forum on the 8chan successor site 8kun urged users to accelerate existing Sinophobic slurs. Some posts on the thread insisted that the Chinese deliberately spread the virus to compromise “western” states (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Secondly, the coronavirus was claimed first as “an invention of the elites” by neo-Nazi WhatsApp group “NSRD” (National Socialist Regime Germany) in its April 2020 post. Consequently, a user known as SPF stated that global corporate elites used the coronavirus to intentionally induce the current economic crisis to “wipe out [their] competition” and to “purge and consolidate” power (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Thirdly, other circulated propaganda blamed capitalism for the emergence of the virus. Prominent German neo-Nazi figure Frank Kraemer advocated in his 7 April 2020 podcast that the current economic crisis was not caused by the pandemic but was rather the result of “the longstanding failures of capitalism and free-market systems.” He also asserted that the “globalist elite” was using the virus “to distract populations from the imminent global financial collapse” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

In another narrative in May, various far right groups criticized the censorship of *Plandemic*, a movie that promoted their conspiracy theories. Far right political ideology was also glorified when extreme right-wing Italian Telegram channel “ID” asserted that the pandemic could have been managed better along far right political ideology. It claimed that the present European liberal policy is the source of Italy’s economic, political, and social difficulties (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

The United Nations was targeted by far right propaganda when *Mundo Viperino* and Miguel Blasco, director of neo-Nazi media group “Aqui la Voz de Europa,” argued that the pandemic is the UN’s secret agenda aimed at achieving population control by “replacing cultures from the Third World” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

In May “Aqui la Voz de Europa” raised conspiracy issues such as the uncertainty over vaccines. On 8 July 2020, a far right “Boogaloo” channel claimed that the military would be deployed to force Ameri-

cans to take the COVID-19 vaccine, possibly during the fall US election (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

5G remained a core coronavirus conspiracy topic for actors on the far right. They posit that cell towers are part of a plan by the faceless “elite” to spread COVID-19. An April 2020 post from a prominent neo-Nazi Telegram channel urged people to “shoot down Amazon delivery drones” and “strap ridiculous amounts of explosives to their drones [and fly] them toward 5G towers then detonate them” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). US neo-Nazi groups were striving to “amplify the fear” of the public and capitalize on “5G hysteria.” In April far right Telegram channels celebrated recent attacks against 5G infrastructure as a means of pressuring “foreign occupation governments” to unveil their oppressive pandemic agendas, and they called on followers to “cut down a couple of 5G towers to force the System to make the first move.” Neo-Nazi videos were disseminated that documented alleged arson attacks against 5G infrastructure (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Antisemitic posts were very common among far right narratives. A post citing the news that a Jewish man was selling a stockpile of medical supplies to doctors at a 700 percent markup claimed the incident as evidence of a broader “anti-white” sentiment within the Jewish community and described Baruch as a “parasite,” since his actions were part of a broader effort to “keep [non-Jewish whites] from protecting themselves while his coethnics spread [the illness].” The decades-old, United States-based neo-Nazi group National Socialist Movement (NSM) also targeted Jews with harassment efforts. Antisemitic and other racial narratives were circulated in the Spanish neo-Nazi group *Aqui la Voz de Europa*’s video, released as a reaction to the George Floyd protests in the United States. The video blamed Jews and globalists for what was alleged to be their agenda to destroy European culture with a “virus” worse than COVID-19. Whites in Europe and elsewhere have allegedly been “mentally conditioned to hate themselves, to hate their history, their culture, and their traditions.” On 29 April 2020, a message from Neo-Nazi group “ML88” posted to their Telegram channel “F” urged that “the time is now” for the far right to organize and seize power. The message was presented as a caption attached to an antisemitic cartoon (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

In April the previous “FEMA Camp” conspiracy theory resurfaced among far right Telegram users. Consequently, incitements to violence against FEMA agents were disseminated. In addition, a US-based neo-Nazi group called for a “Psychological Warfare Campaign” during the pandemic. It encouraged the spread of coronavirus conspiracy theories and far right propaganda and symbols. The goal of these initiatives was



to “amplify fear” among the public and capitalize on “5G hysteria.” Far right media services also published a seven-part series of posts claiming that the pandemic is a hoax (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Right-wing extremist groups in South America were engaged in various doxxing incidents. On 20 May 2020, Anarchists Worldwide released the date and birthplace of Brazilian politician Antonio Fontinele along with his residential addresses and his cell phone number in retaliation for the government’s alleged failures in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. Anarchists Worldwide issued a second “doxxing action” in June when the personal information of Roberto Jefferson Monteiro Francisco, a Brazilian Labor Party (PTB) politician, was disseminated. Jefferson, who was expelled from Brazil’s Congress in 2005 and banned from being elected to public office for ten years, currently has a strong social media presence and is vocal in his support of President Jair Bolsonaro. In a third act of retaliation for the government’s alleged failures in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, Anarchists Worldwide distributed Almino Monteiro Álvares Affonso’s personal information, calling him “corrupt” and accusing him of acquiring “enormous personal wealth stolen from the Brazilian people.” Consequently, an anarchist blog by NOS released the purported personal information of Nilton de Albuquerque Cerqueira, a General of the Brazilian army. The military executive was doxxed to warn members of the army and police to withdraw their support for Bolsonaro otherwise they will be targeted (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Social media accounts in German, Spanish, Russian, and English circulated a conspiracy theory that claimed AstraZeneca had begun producing the COVID-19 vaccine in 2018, more than a year before the pandemic outbreak. The posts concluded: “Their end goal has been to depopulate humans; you are the carbon they want to reduce.” Other conspiracy theorists on social media sites linked the AstraZeneca vaccine to adverse reactions “such as blood clots, including some that required amputations, drawing claims that the vaccines were a tool of depopulation and a bioweapon” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020). After sharing Pfizer’s news that immunity from its COVID-19 vaccine may wane after six months and require a booster, conspiracy theory social media channels encouraged firing squad execution for pharma executives and attacks against vaccine facilities. Social media users expressed anger and skepticism against combination vaccines, claiming that they are more lethal than traditional therapeutics. As a response to the claims of the COVID-19 vaccine’s adverse effects, a user in a Boogaloo group called for the destruction of vaccine centers, stating: “Burn vaccination centers with all faggots inside.” As a response to news of North Caroli-

na’s “Doses-to-Doors” COVID-19 vaccination campaign, “far right and QAnon groups threatened to rape, murder, and even deploy biological agents against the health department workers delivering shots: with one writing, ‘I’ll go “shot” for “shot” with these communist assholes’” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Conspiracy theorists incited violence against Joe Biden and his administration in response to the news that the United States government will mandate COVID-19 vaccines for active-duty servicemen. The United Kingdom government was also threatened with violence over the possible vaccination of children. Social media users claimed, “If you go for the kids with the vaccines, trust me, we’re coming for you,” with commenters supporting him: “With you, all the way, leave our kids alone.” QAnon and conspiracy theorist social media posts threatened violence over what was alleged to be Moderna’s vaccine experiment on children in Australia. Condemning pandemic restrictions, a Russian white nationalist organization “called for guerrilla warfare and resistance against the colonial regime.” Neo-Nazi and QAnon social media groups spread the European addresses of Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, and Johnson & Johnson vaccine producers, stating that “these companies must disappear” (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

**Table 3.1.** Communication outlets propagating conspiracy theories.

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<b>Conspiracy theories</b>	<b>European far right groups</b>	<b>American far right groups</b>
Anti-Chinese propaganda	Yes	Yes
Coronavirus as an invention of the elites	Yes	Yes
Anti-capitalism	Yes	No
Plandemic, the movie	Yes	Yes
Far right political ideology	Yes	No
Narratives against the United Nations	Yes	No
5G conspiracy theories	Yes	Yes
Uncertainty over vaccines	Yes	Yes
Antisemitic narratives	Yes	Yes
FEMA Camp conspiracy theories	No	Yes
The pandemic is a hoax	Yes	Yes
Doxxing	No	Yes

The introduction of vaccine passports and other restrictive counter-measures announced in 2021 further amplified social media account activities. Online far right conspiracy theorist campaigns called on supporters to boycott companies requiring employees to vaccinate themselves. Social media users heavily defended unvaccinated United Airlines staff, who were to be placed on unpaid leave. An anti-COVID-19 channel organized demonstrations across France against vaccine passports. A white nationalist organization based in the Netherlands and Belgium promoted an Amsterdam protest against the vaccine passport program. Their motto was “Say no to the QR society!” Rallies against COVID-19 passports were also scheduled for Glasgow, Scotland, and England, Italy, and Australia (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

### **Outlets with Recruiting Purposes**

Lockdown protests were a central pillar in right-wing extremists’ strategy, as extremists could gain favor with protestors. White nationalists and neo-Nazis used this kind of demonstration to recruit and amplify their presence amid the COVID-19 crisis. Additionally, the influential neo-fascist hate group Proud Boys engaged in various small protests on its Telegram channel, not just for media attention and recruitment but also to expand their political influence. The Philadelphia branch of the same entity proposed using a large, widely publicized gathering as a means of gaining recognition for their organization. To incite further tensions around such mass demonstrations, extremists disseminated misinformation about protestors being arrested, thereby urging violent acts against law enforcement. After novel epidemic restrictions were introduced in Australia and New Zealand in 2021, conspiracy theorists called for anti-lockdown protests at several local government locations. In England and Spain, COVID-19 conspiracy channels urged European followers to participate in anti-lockdown demonstrations too. Reportedly, a prominent neo-Nazi group based in Switzerland took part in a demonstration against vaccine mandates and handed out its promotional material among those who were present. Following the 20 March 2021 demonstrations against pandemic restrictions, an international anti-lockdown group issued an announcement urging a third round of global protests in forty-five countries on 24 July 2021 (SITE Intelligence Group 2021).

Far right extremists attempted to misuse cyberspace for their purposes in innovative ways. An example is a 6 May 2020 Telegram channel “BMW,” which encouraged its followers to “raid” an online seminar

hosted by the political organization known as Turning Point USA (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

### **Outlets Advocating Antigovernment Narratives**

Spanish and French far right communities were the most active in disseminating anti-government content. “Pugilato,” a Spanish-language neo-Nazi heavy metal band, released a music video on 8 May 2020 representing antigovernment voices condemning Spain’s pandemic lockdown. Democracia Nacional (DN) agreed with the journalists’ standpoint condemning the Sánchez government’s state of emergency for COVID-19 and warning that the country was moving toward a dictatorship. A released DN poster accused the government of being the real virus. In an 11 May 2020 blogpost, French neo-Nazi Blanche Europe (BE) claimed that authorities have been using the COVID-19 crisis as means of controlling the population. Previously, in April, the same extremist group accused officials of taking advantage of the pandemic situation to enforce “repressive” measures against the public. French white nationalist blog Jeune Nation shared an article from the far right publication Militant, adding that the pandemic had been used as a tool to control the public. The paper suggested that official information channels were deliberately overplaying the effects of the disease to justify restrictive social measures (Ariza 2020). Jeune Nation also shared information about a rally being organized by Les Nationalistes, a French far right group, on 22 May 2020. The event called for the re-opening of religious spaces and lifting of the restrictive measures put in place during the quarantine (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

### **Far Right Activities in Australia and New Zealand**

Right-wing extremist movements in Australia and New Zealand had a concerted focus on anti-Chinese and anti-Asian narratives. In a collaboration between the association of Being Asian Australian and the Asian Australian Alliance, a tool was created to facilitate the reporting of racist incidents as a result of the pandemic (Baker 2020). Chinese Australians were reported to have experienced an increase in hostility, both online and in person. Social media posts, racists interactions, and bullying incidents at schools exacerbated the fear of Chinese people in Australia. Propaganda was disseminated by the neo-Nazi Telegram channel “BTL” that included photos of banners blaming Chinese immi-

grants for the spread of the coronavirus. According to Christina Ariza at the Tony Blair Institute, there was a huge spike in COVID-19-related anti-Chinese and anti-Asian racism in Australia. Importantly, it is unfortunate that confirming the far right groups behind these activities is still particularly challenging (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Similar to United States-based far right extremists, fellow Australian radicals also exploited Black Lives Matter protests. These demonstrations offered unique opportunities for white supremacists to mobilize themselves and misuse these events for their recruiting purposes. In both the US and Australia, posts on Telegram discussed extremists' attendance at these rallies (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

Regarding far right activities in New Zealand, on 21 March 2020, a user commented in support of a neo-Nazi *Vorherrschaft* Division (VD) statement that incited followers to target critical infrastructure. One of the most prominent New Zealand-based far right groups is Action Zealandia. This white nationalist group was established shortly after Brenton Tarrant's Christchurch attack in March 2019. Its members adhere to a Pan-European Identitarian ideology that has hostile views of Western governments, media corporations, immigrants, people of color, and religious minorities. A week before the anniversary of Tarrant's Christchurch attack, neo-Nazi Telegram channel "BTL" shared a selfie taken by a masked individual outside Al Noor mosque in Christchurch accompanied by a threat to repeat the 2019 shooting attack that killed fifty-one people and injured at least forty. The attack was foiled and the individual, a member of Action Zealandia (AZ), arrested. During June and July, AZ activists hung banners with slogans articulating "White Lives Matter" at frequently visited public spaces. A video that was posted about these activities concluded with the message "Join Us" and encouraged those who intended to join to provide donations by visiting the contact page of the group (SITE Intelligence Group 2020).

## Conclusion

Radical right-wing extremists mobilized themselves in a timely manner in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Accordingly, this chapter has examined far right operations, incitements, and propaganda activities between 11 March and 31 July 2020 to better understand how these radical groups capitalized on the crisis situation. Europe-, Americas-, Australia-, and New Zealand-based far right groups' operational activities and narratives have been the subject of our analysis.

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