

# **RADICAL MILIEUS IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

## **Introduction**



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**DARE: Dialogue about Radicalisation and Equality**

## **Radical milieus in historical context**

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## 1. Introduction

One of the objectives of DARE is to understand radicalisation trends in historical, spatial and political context, including their interaction and potential for cumulative effect. This report probes the concept of ‘radical milieus’ in their historical context, addressing the role that radical milieus might play in the radicalisation processes of young people. The five country-level reports that comprise this study examine the concept of the radical milieu through a range of historically situated case studies, each reflecting a broad range of different geographical, temporal and ideological contexts with the aim of deepening our collective understanding of this sometimes overlooked context.

### 1.1 Theoretical framework

The starting point for this strand of research in DARE was the recognition that ‘radicalisation’ must be understood not simply in terms of individual, psychological characteristics or structural, socio-economic, ‘drivers’ but as a situational, relational or interactional phenomenon. Understanding the interaction between political and cultural context and an individual’s cognitive development remains crucial to understanding the radicalisation process and the pathways that lead individuals toward extremist behaviour (Costanza, 2015: 3). In order to better understand these dynamics this series of reports focusses upon the concept of the ‘radical milieu’, which it defines as the social formations through which collective identities and solidarities are constructed. These social and cultural formations, from which political organisations emerge, are rarely the direct object of empirical study and thus form a ‘missing link’ (Malthaner and Waldmann, 2014) in radicalisation research.

This absence in research to date is surprising given that radical milieus represent, as Malthaner and Waldmann argue, the supportive and sustaining social ‘environments’ from within which those engaged in violent, clandestine activity can gain affirmation and sanction for their actions. Radical milieus provide an environment in which ‘grievance’ narratives, ‘hidden’ truths and ‘revealed’, ‘rejected’ or ‘stigmatised’ knowledge is disseminated and the internal cultures of such environments are framed. Radical milieus are not simply ‘hotbeds’ of radicalisation, however. Whilst they can certainly actively encourage or incite violence, not to mention prolonging it through active or tacit support, radical milieus are also diverse and polyvalent social environments in which individuals often criticise, challenge or confront the narratives, frames and violent excesses of militant activity. As such, radical milieus can also inhibit and constrain violent escalation. The contextual focus on radical milieus also serves to contribute to the wider understanding of radicalisation as a complex, situational, emotional (as well as ideological) and dynamic process or set of processes.

To fulfil this brief the historical case studies constituting this report address a series of research questions including asking what role historical memory and ‘grievance’ or ‘humiliation’ narratives play within radical milieus and how this shapes radicalisation processes. Where applicable they asked what role conspiracy theories and eschatological narratives have played in radicalisation ‘waves’. How these vary across national and ideological contexts is the subject of a cross-country synthesis report. The reports also addressed the circumstances the respective radical milieus (compared across geographical-cultural-historical contexts) contributed to escalation of violence and – importantly – where they did not. They also sought to examine the nature of the relationship between radical milieus, violent political groups and the broader social and political, including gender, environment.

Several of the radical milieus chosen for study were selected to allow synergies with the cases chosen for the parallel study of ‘cumulative extremism’. Where this was possible, researchers were able to feed these historical case studies into the development of our understanding of how movement cultures and identities can be transformed by the escalation of violence and also, importantly, but often overlooked, how they might also serve to constrain violence. By delineating the points of tension or fracture within and between violent groups and the radical milieus from which they emerge, the case studies reported here were able to explore the roles that they might play in processes of radicalisation, de-radicalisation and non-radicalisation, however, analytically construed.

## 1.2 Case study rationale and description

Researchers adopted a case study approach for both strands of research. In the work reported here, the five reports cover three western European countries (UK, France, Germany), one Mediterranean country (Greece) and one non-EU country (Turkey). This broad geographic distribution helped to facilitate the broadest possible scope for observing how the ‘radical milieu’ might be observed across a range of different national contexts and cultures, and temporal periods.

Whilst each case study is situated within a very different national historical context, the case studies themselves explored markedly different types of radical milieu in order to better understand their relationship with violent groups and organisations that sometimes emerge from such ostensibly ‘non-political’ social and cultural settings. Indeed the varied nature of the case studies reported on here highlights that radical milieus can be religious, ethnic or political (or a combination of these). Even within the same party political ‘family’, radical milieus can exhibit very different ideological features depending upon the wider context from which they emerge. The contrast between the British, German and Greek case studies highlights this.

The UK report examined a youthful radical milieu that emerged in Britain during the early 1980s comprising of individuals disillusioned with the direction of racial nationalist politics who gathered around a ‘New Right’ magazine called *The Scorpion*. The German report explores the phenomenon of the radical milieu through a case study of neo-Nazism in the early 1990s in the federal state of Thuringia. The importance of understanding the role such milieu play for those involved, and the values they seek to instil in adherents, is reflected by the fact that several of those involved in this violence obsessed milieu subsequently came together to found the National Socialist Underground (NSU). This extreme right terrorist group, which killed nine men and a policewoman, functioned, with support from the radical milieu from which it had emerged, undetected for nearly 10 years until its exposure in 2011. The Greek case offers a comparable case study, one that explores the radical milieu from which the Greek national socialist group Golden Dawn emerged in 1980; operating as a minute *groupscale* on the margins of Greek society until its sudden rise to prominence made it a major player in Greek politics in 2012. The French report meanwhile examines patterns of radicalisation within the French Islamist youth milieu since the 1980s and critically documents the evolution of academic and public debate on the relationship between Islam and extremism including the models of radicalisation devised and deployed in this spatial and historical context. Turkish case shifts the unit of analysis outside of Europe to explore the impact of state repression on the radical Islamist milieu from 1997 onwards, the so-called ‘28 February Process’ which was a ‘landmark event’ in the collective memory of political Islamists in the country.

## 1.3 Contribution and future analysis

A transnational cross-case comparative report synthesising the findings of the five separate reports is to follow as part of this study and will collectively highlight the need for a better understanding of the importance of radical milieus in the lives of young people navigating their way through such contexts, which can expose them to processes of violent escalation. Violence is by no means a given outcome, however, and as the case studies themselves highlight, even in those in which terrorism was an outcome, there were others within the milieu who either de-escalated their activity or moreover never escalated it at all despite being part of a milieu saturated with violent rhetoric. Better understanding of how the radical milieu itself can counteract violence or at least a certain intensification of violence arguably requires further focus from researchers. Thus the reports that follow should be seen as five historically situated research reports, which stand alone but also serve to inform other aspects of the DARE project with regard to what might be ‘new’ about contemporary patterns of radicalisation and interactive radicalisation.

In terms of their contribution to the wider DARE project it should be noted that the relationship between the emergence of violent groups and radical milieus is not just the focus of the historical case studies reported here, they are also the object of study DARE research into offline and online Islamist

and anti-Islamist/extreme right milieus, which explore communication and individual trajectories in specifically targeted milieus of radicalisation. The reports that follow this introduction thus contribute a broader historical understanding of the role that such radical milieus have played in history and in a variety of different national contexts, which will serve to underpin the research in other parts of the project.

Several of the broader research questions posed, such as how the historic comparison between and within these national contexts can enhance our understanding of the dynamics by which contests between opposing movements and the state escalate, deescalate or fail to escalate will be addressed in a cross-country synthesis report that will aggregate the findings across cases.

## 1.4 Methods and sources

Each of the case studies in this report relied upon desktop research. Whilst primary sources were used to a greater or lesser degree by each of the research teams, secondary academic literature was the principal source of data collection drawing from disciplines of history and social sciences, broadly defined. 'Grey' literature was also drawn upon where relevant. Whilst several broader theoretical articles detailing the nature of radical milieus were shared across the research teams, each team also collected and collated their own bespoke literature reviews of the relevant secondary source literature germane to their own case studies which included academic publications, government reports, newspapers, blogs, memoirs and other such reports. Some reports utilised searchable news databases (i.e. Factiva/Gale) for gathering information whilst others drew more heavily upon archival material. Given the differing types of data gathered by the research teams, conditioned by the differing nature of each individual study, data analysis varied from case to case. Whilst the United Kingdom and Greek cases utilised a historical methodological approach, others - including the French and German cases - were sociological whilst the Turkish case used discourse analysis in its reconstruction of the grievance narratives inherent in the collective memory of the radical milieu.

## 1.5 References

Costanza, W. (2015) 'Adjusting Our Gaze: An Alternative Approach to Understanding Youth Radicalization', *Journal of Strategic Security* 8(1): 1-15.

Malthaner, S. and Waldmann, P. (2014) 'The Radical Milieu Conceptualising the Supportive Social Environment of Terrorist Groups,' *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 37 (12): 979-98.