

From Traitor to Zealot

What makes a neo-Nazi become a convinced anti-fascist or a radical left-winger become a devout Salafist? How do they manage to fit into their new environment and gain acceptance as a former enemy? The people featured in this book made highly puzzling journeys, first venturing into extremist milieus and then deciding to switch to the opposite side. By using their extraordinary life stories and their own narratives, this book provides the first in-depth analysis of how and why people move between seemingly opposing extremist environments that can sometimes overlap and influence each other. It aims to understand how these extremists manage to convince their new group that they can be trusted, which also allows us to dive deep into the psychology of extremism and terrorism. This fascinating work will be of immense value to those studying radicalization and counter-radicalization in terrorism studies, social psychology, and political science.

DANIEL KOEHLER is Founding Director of the German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS) and a leading expert on terrorism, violent extremism, radicalization, and deradicalization. He is member of the editorial board of the International Centre for Counter-Terrorism in The Hague and a research fellow at the Polarization and Extremism Research and Innovation Lab of the American University in Washington, DC.

From Traitor to Zealot

*Exploring the Phenomenon of Side-Switching
in Extremism and Terrorism*

Daniel Koehler

German Institute on Radicalization and De-radicalization Studies (GIRDS)



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This book is dedicated to all victims of violent extremism and terrorism, as well as to those who show the strength and courage to make right on previous mistakes in their lives.

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Foreword

Spoiler alert – becoming involved in terrorism involves significant risk. Despite the allure of adventure, excitement, belonging to, and serving a cause and community bigger than oneself, it is fraught with danger. Even if recruits are allowed to join (or encouraged to act on their own), success is set at a very high bar indeed. Terrorist attacks constitute effective psychological warfare in the short term, but they rarely accomplish long-term goals. For its participants, involvement in terrorism likely ends in capture, conviction, and detention. It often ends in death. Now these realities are not unknown to the prospective recruit. In fact, terrorist organizations and their recruiters are keen to point out that this life isn't for everyone. But they do so for very particular reasons. It is often the very promise of danger, of righteous suffering in the face of insurmountable odds against an enemy and ideology, that to a certain mindset is an irresistible allure. As even casual observers of terrorism know, there is no shortage of prospects willing to risk seeing if the reality can match the fantasy. And yet, even for the most ardent of true believers, reality can bite hard. The day-to-day grind of clandestine groups, the stress, fear, paranoia, exhaustion, and countless other group pressures can be suffocating. Most members of terrorist groups, and extremist groups more broadly, struggle to cope with such strain. More often than not, disillusionment sets in. Yet even then, some thrive under these conditions while watching others buckle around them. For some, disillusionment is temporary, just one more step on a rocky road, another obstacle to test one's commitment and faith. For others, disillusionment is a wake-up call, a warning to get out, and get out now before it's too late. For those that do get out, some leave with their views intact. They may no longer be involved and engaged in terrorist activity but remain as committed and radical as ever. Others, however, not only leave but disavow the very beliefs, ideals, and core principles they once seemed ready to risk death for – they not only disengage, but they *deradicalize*.

To those who study such things, Daniel Koehler is a household name. A true scientist-practitioner, Daniel is one of the few in the field who talks the talk and walks the walk. In 2016, his book, *Understanding Deradicalization: Methods, Tools and Programs for Countering Violent Extremism* provided us a richly

detailed guide to designing programs aimed at facilitating that process. That book was nothing less than a revelation. He provided theoretical insights for those seeking to conceptualize and design such programs and real-world practical advice to those tasked with building, running, and evaluating them. In the four years that followed, Daniel's work catapulted him to the front lines of deradicalization programs worldwide, where his input and advice is routinely solicited by those who take deradicalization seriously. As if all that wasn't enough, now, barely five years later, he has once again given us something extraordinary.

Building on his knowledge of how, why, and when people leave terrorist groups, Daniel turns his attention to those who defect by *switching sides*. When he told me he was writing a book on this topic, I stopped in my tracks. The questions came thick and fast. *Wow. Do we even know anything about this? Why would someone do that? How can they do it without being killed?* If being involved in extremist and terrorist groups was not already risky enough, Daniel found that there are some (just how many we don't know, and he freely acknowledges this) that seek out the opportunity to migrate to *other* extremist groups. Not only that, but they also sometimes switch over to those at the complete *opposite* end of their ideological spectrum – Daniel found cases of members of far-left extremist groups moving to the far right, and vice versa. Elsewhere, he uncovered cases of people once deeply committed to far-right or far-left groups who ended up switching over to Islamic extremist groups. To put it mildly, these cases are head-scratchers. Why on earth would someone commit the time, effort, and risk involved in developing commitment to one ideological extremist group, and entertain the astronomical risk that entails, to then not just turn *against* their group, but in doing so move toward their once-mortal enemy in order to gain *their* trust and serve *their* cause? Who would do that? Why would they do that? How can they not only perform the requisite mental gymnastics to switch ideologies but, as Daniel asks, in the process of successfully switching sides, to somehow gain the trust of a group made up entirely of one's former enemies instead of being killed on sight?

The background to this book can be traced to an article of Daniel's, published in the academic journal *Political Psychology*. In that paper he highlighted four case studies of people who had switched sides. During his research for the piece, Daniel found that side-switching was virtually ignored by researchers of terrorism and political violence. Sure, there was a little recognition here and there in the literature about the existence of some extremists holding certain ideologies prior to their involvement in different extremist groups, but, he found, existing data sets either didn't provide enough information or, worse still, they simply failed to see the significance of it. As a result, Daniel has given us this wonderful book.

From Traitor to Zealot: Exploring the Phenomenon of Side-Switching in Extremism and Terrorism is profoundly important. It is a serious attempt to

address a deeply neglected, and admittedly fascinating, puzzle. It is a rare book indeed that reads both as thriller, with rich historical illustrations of side-switching, combined with nuanced theoretical analysis of how side-switching in today's extremist and terrorist milieu can be understood via perspectives from academic disciplines. The book is illustrated with dozens of real-life accounts of testimonies from those involved. In doing so, Daniel identifies the similarities in side-switcher pathways, life cycles, and experiences. The existing research on violent extremism can only take us so far; Daniel acknowledges this point while masterfully anchoring his arguments in concepts from criminology, psychology, sociology, history, and philosophy. That he does so with such ease highlights his own capacity to side-switch perspectives, theories, and conceptual frameworks in a way that most terrorism researchers would find challenging (and for which we both admire Koehler and are envious of him). Even the process of mapping defector life cycles, let alone uncovering the mystery of what motivates side-switchers, constitutes complex, difficult problems. To fully understand these processes requires not just a close examination of how they navigate such pathways, but how they cope with the realities of the day-to-day internal conflict that so often defines such groups. On its surface, side-switching seems to defy explanation. To ally oneself against an ideology one previously rallied against so vehemently appears at odds with a key requisite to being an effective extremist – remaining steadfastly committed to core principles. How then can we reconcile mental rigidity with ideological flexibility? If the questions seem complex, it can hardly be surprising that answers do not easily reveal themselves. Yet this doesn't deter Daniel. On the contrary, he effortlessly weaves painstaking historical research, with insights from research on terrorism, extremism, civil wars, and ideologies and so much more.

Yet despite all of this, what always shines through Daniel Koehler's work is an unwavering sense of optimism. He carefully and meticulously identifies lessons from these storylines for preventing and countering violent extremism. What do we do with people who don't just want to get out of an extremist group, but in doing so want to "re-up" with alternative extremist group? Can anything be done to divert side-switchers, to steer them toward an off-ramp headed back to conventional society instead of onward into new extremist territory? To learn more, you simply have to turn these pages. If this area represents, in Daniel's words, uncharted territory, then Koehler is its cartographer, navigator, captain, and sailor.

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Preface

On Sunday, June 28, 1914, in the city of Sarajevo, today's capital of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the 19-year-old Bosnian-Serb Nedeljko Čabrinović, member of a seven-men-strong hit squad, hurled a hand grenade at a procession of six cars that passed by the central police station. He aimed at the third car with a rolled back top that exposed to the public the Archduke Franz Ferdinand of Austria, the heir presumptive to the throne of Austria-Hungary, on his way to an opening ceremony of a hospital. The bomb exploded under the wheel of the following fourth car after the driver of the targeted vehicle had spotted the attack and accelerated to avoid being hit. After Čabrinović had missed the Archduke's car, he swallowed a cyanide capsule to escape arrest and jumped into the River Miljacka. A few seconds later, however, he was hauled back out and detained. The cyanide pill had failed to kill him. Franz Ferdinand and his wife Sophie, Duchess of Hohenberg, decided to visit the victims of the bomb attack at the local hospital. By pure chance, Gavrilo Princip, another assassin of the ultra-nationalist "Black Hand" secret military society to which Čabrinović belonged as well, sat in a café nearby. He immediately seized the opportunity, walked across the street, and shot the royal couple, thereby setting in motion a chain of events that led to the outbreak of the First World War.

Over eight years later in Rome, on October 28, 1922, leaders of the Italian Fascist Party had planned a coup d'état. On that day, between 25,000 and 30,000 troops of the so-called Blackshirts entered the city and directly threatened a violent takeover of state power from King Victor Emmanuel III. Even though the Italian Prime Minister Luigi Facta initially wanted to declare a state of siege, the king gave in to the Fascist's demands and yielded power without resistance, fearing the outbreak of civil war. Fascist propaganda subsequently celebrated the event as the "March on Rome" and idolized it as a revolutionary seizure of the government even though the truth was far from it. Nevertheless, this pivotal moment in Italian and European history brought to power 39-year-old Benito Mussolini, nicknamed "Il Duce" ("The Leader"), who was appointed prime minister of Italy by the king one day after the "March." Through this act, state power was handed over to him and his

“National Fascist Party” (Partito Nazionale Fascista, or PNF) without large-scale armed conflict. Under Mussolini’s reign, Fascist Italy would rise to a significant military power and directly inspire neighboring political movements ideologically aligned with Fascism. In Germany, for example, the young National Socialist movement led by the so far mostly unknown Adolf Hitler would see the Italian success in taking over the government through demonstrative show of force as a proof of concept, and emulate it with the failed November 8–9, 1923, “Hitler-Ludendorff” coup d’état against the Weimar Republic (Alcalde, 2018). In this way, the Italian “March on Rome” precipitated a course of events that led to Hitler’s imprisonment and had a significant impact on his political strategies. The botched National Socialist march on Berlin, commonly referred to as the “Beer Hall Putsch,” would become a galvanizing moment for the Nazi movement and give rise to a martyr cult acting as one of their key recruiting narratives afterward (Gordon, 2015).

On February 22, 1945, an Allied Forces combat aircraft attacked a car on the road between the small southern German towns of Mainau and Sigmaringen. The incident left dead 46-year-old Jacques Doriot, a member of the German Waffen-SS and head of the “Fascist French Populist Party” (Parti Populaire Français, or PPF). Doriot had come to Germany in December 1943 to join the exiled pro-German government of Vichy France, which had been installed by the Nazis to control the non-occupied part of the country between 1940 and 1944. With the death of its chairman, the PPF was dissolved and the most collaborationist French Fascist party that had helped to round up and hand over members of the Jewish community to the Nazis came to an end. Although by the time of its demise the PPF had lost virtually all political relevance, it nevertheless played an important role in the mobilization of French volunteers for the German SS. Doriot himself had created the “French Volunteer Legion against Bolshevism” (Légion des volontaires français contre le bolchévisme, or LVF), which became an official unit in the Wehrmacht and saw action on the Eastern Front. During his time in and around Sigmaringen, Doriot, together with the PPF, created their own French newspaper and radio station designed to spread pro-Nazi propaganda among their fellow countrymen and sow disunity. The organization was also involved in conducting guerrilla and sabotage operations in the liberated parts of France against the Allied Forces, for example, by parachuting operatives behind enemy lines (Brunet, 1986; Kestel, 2012).

At first sight, these three historical events seem to have little in common, except that they all involve convinced extremists, violence, and partially wide repercussions on a national and even global scale. All three events had profound and immediate impacts on the societies around them and contemporary observers who were attuned enough with public affairs to pay attention to them. But this is not the reason why I chose to begin this book with those three

incidents and the three individuals at their core. Indeed, the common thread between these events is not the violence per se, nor the form of violent extremism or the potential national and global impact, but the biographical pathways of the three persons whose own lives and by extension those of hundreds, thousands, and even millions of others have directly or indirectly changed as a consequence of their involvement in these incidents. All three, Nedeljko Čabrinović, Benito Mussolini, and Jacques Doriot, held very different political views at one point of their lives before they acted upon (and became infamous for) an ideology so opposed to their previously held opinions that these can only be described as hostile to each other. All three began their political and radical careers with a movement and ideology that aimed to eradicate those groups they later joined and helped to succeed. In short, all three are examples of extremist side-switchers, which one side might call traitors and the other newborn converts who rid themselves of the erroneous ways in their past.

Nedeljko Čabrinović was a convicted socialist before joining the ultra-nationalist and militaristic “Black Hand” group. Fascinatingly, the organization was ideologically diverse and included also some members who held anarchist views. During the interrogation, Čabrinović later explained his ideological shift. At the age of 14 he worked in a socialist printing press, which also produced an anarchist journal. Hence, members of anarchist groups regularly came to the office, where Čabrinović engaged in conversations with them: “. . . and I argued with them frequently. I was a socialist and as such I fought their ideas as much as I could. Finally, I was defeated by their ideas and became a convinced anarchist. Every evening I came to their lectures and stayed until . . . the night” (original in German, translated by author, Kohler, 1918, p. 4). Once he had joined the anarchists, Čabrinović was expelled from the socialist party, lost his job, and was attacked as a traitor. He later met one of the coconspirators, whom he noted to be a nationalist with opposing views to his own at that point but continued to develop his own ideology. Asked about his own conviction in the interrogation, Čabrinović replied: “anarchist with a nationalist blend” (original in German, translated by author, Kohler, 1918, p. 6).

Benito Mussolini had taken over the secretary position of the Socialist Party in Trent (which was Austrian at the time) in 1909 and became the editor in chief of the newspaper *Avanti!* in December 1910, the main outlet of the “Italian Socialist Party” (Partito Socialista Italiano, or PSI), before he evolved into one of the world’s most infamous ultra-nationalist extremists under the banner of Fascism. Jaques Doriot was a leading member of the French Communist Party, which he had joined in 1920. Two years later, he became a member of the Presidium of the Executive Committee of the Comintern, and in 1923 Doriot was made the secretary of the French Federation of Young

Communists. In 1934, he was expelled from the Communist Party for advocating an alliance with the socialists. At the time, Doriot was the mayor in Saint Denis. His views changed drastically toward nationalism and in 1936 he founded the PPF and oriented the party toward Nazi Germany and Fascist Italy. The PPF attracted many far-left defectors and its leadership circle, calling itself “politburo” after the executive committee in communist parties, for example, included Henri Barbé (1902–1966, former member of the French Communist Party’s leadership) and Paul Marion (1899–1954, journalist and former member of the central committee of the French Communist Party) (Allardyce, 1966; Brunet, 1986).

These three individuals have shown remarkable ideological flexibility over their life courses, which enabled them to shift between positions so fundamentally opposed that most observers struggle to fathom how this is even possible psychologically and physically. Naturally, the easiest way to explain this behavior is to dismiss it as mere opportunism by people who look to gain power and status with complete disregard for actual political values, goals, and ideals. Also, it might be tempting to see side-switching as proof that “all extremist groups are alike” and the ideology truly does not matter. Whether this is the case or not (I will attempt to show it is not), these perspectives do not help to explain how such side-switchers actually manage to convince themselves and more importantly the new group they defect to, that they are indeed not simple and untrustworthy opportunists but instead real believers in the (now) true cause. Imagine the substantial risks involved in approaching a violent extremist milieu from the camp of its ideological mortal enemies and it becomes obvious that you better have a good and credible narrative at hand, because in all likelihood, there will be a lot of explaining to be done. Strikingly, the three cases I chose to introduce us to the phenomenon of side-switching in extremism and many of those we will encounter in the following study have not only successfully managed to defect from one extremist milieu to another (hostile) one, they oftentimes also reached significant and exalted position with much influence, status, and respect from their new extremist peers. Could it be that this ideological flexibility and whatever else makes those side-switchers survive the transition mentally and physically becomes a unique strength and decisive push factor in their extremist careers?

When I began to research extremist and terrorist side-switching in early 2019 for an article published in the journal *Political Psychology* (Koehler, 2019b), I initially focused on four well-known cases of extremist side-switchers from Germany who had become fairly exposed due to their uncompromising and outspoken extremist views in public and their (partially) violent actions. At that point, I assumed that this phenomenon would be extremely rare and linked to exceptional personal and contextual circumstances. Contrary to my expectations, however, I discovered more and more cases of extremist

side-switchers from many different backgrounds and countries who had successfully managed the transition and lived to tell the story throughout the decades. My curiosity began to grow even more after I looked into various fields of research and found that the migration between hostile groups is mostly untreated not only in terrorism and radicalization research, but in wider social psychology and many adjacent disciplines as well. Something undoubtedly significant happened in the lives and radical careers of some, maybe even many, extremists and terrorists seemingly overlooked by academics and most observers.

How widely spread is the phenomenon of side-switching in extremist radicalization pathways? Are we looking at a rare curiosity that is clearly the exception to the rule or is it a piece in the puzzle of explaining large portions of radicalization processes we have missed so far? No one really knows at this point. Since the issue of extremist side-switching has received so little academic attention until now, it would be fair to speak of an unchartered territory. Usually, researchers are only interested in the extremist milieu a person ended up in or was lastly active in. Of course, many scholars have attempted to profile individual risk factors and biographical trajectories that led to that violent engagement but stunningly, previous contrary political convictions were either so rare that they did not end up being reported as significant or never caught the attention of those scholars.

Naturally, side-switching depends a lot on the historical and political context we look at. Defectors switching sides to the enemy have always been part of wars and violent conflicts, for example. Even between highly ideologized combatant parties defections occur. In the Second World War, for example, the Soviet Union supported the “National Committee Free Germany” (Nationalkomitee Freies Deutschland, or NKFD), which was founded in 1943 by German prisoners of war and communist emigrants. The NKFD was used to produce German-language counterpropaganda that called upon German soldiers and officers to defect and it even fielded combat units to fight the Nazis. One could argue that unpolitical soldiers taken prisoner could be easily persuaded to become active against their former comrades in exchange for better treatment and status, but the NKFD was led by numerous former high ranking officers and members of the Nazi party “National Socialist German Workers Party” (Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei, or NSDAP) (Scheurig, 1993; Ueberschär, 1996).

To name only one example, Major Heinrich Homann was born in 1911 and became a member of the NSDAP in 1933. Commanding an artillery regiment, he was taken prisoner during the battle of Stalingrad in 1943, after which he became one of the founding members of the NKFD. After the war, he achieved high-ranking political positions in the socialist German Democratic Republic (GDR). To facilitate ideological defection of Nazi prisoners of war, the Soviets

ran numerous so-called anti-fascist front schools led by the NKFD. These schools had the primary goal of ideologically turning around Nazi officers and soldiers in three- to four-months-long rehabilitation courses (Scheurig, 1993; Ueberschär, 1996). This also worked the other way.

Russian Red Army general Andrey Andreyevich Vlasov, for example, was born in 1901 and joined the Communist Party in 1930. Hailed as a hero of the Soviet Republic for his actions during the battle for Moscow between October 1941 and January 1942, he was awarded the Order of the Red Banner on January 24, 1942. During the battle for Leningrad, his unit was encircled and eventually destroyed by the Wehrmacht. He refused to be flown out and hid for ten days in German-occupied territory before he was taken prisoner on July 12, 1942. Vlasov then defected to collaborate with Nazi Germany and publicly claimed to have come to realize during his ten-day hiding that Josef Stalin was the greatest enemy of the Russian people. With German support, he then created the “Russian Liberation Army,” which fielded combat units including those Russian prisoners of war who were willing to fight against their former comrades. Vlasov and eleven other senior officers were executed for high treason in August 1946 (Andreyev, 1989; Lyth, 1989). Transitions between the Nazi movement and communists in Germany before the Second World War were not uncommon at all as both sides tried to appeal to the same target group with similar arguments, in part (Timothy Scott Brown, 2009).

Take for example the case of Herbert Crüger (1911–2003), a resistance fighter against the Nazis and leading member of the German Communist Party. Crüger’s story is not only fascinating because he began his political career as a member of the Nazi Hitler Youth (Hitler Jugend, or HJ), which he joined in 1931 and quickly rose to be a leading figure in a Berlin section of the organization. In his memoirs, Crüger describes his early motivations for this step as a deep commitment to social justice, anti-capitalism, and a national revolution. Since the social democrats had signed the treaty of Versailles in 1919, he deemed the left-wing socialists to be traitors to the national cause and well-being (Crüger, 1998, pp. 76–77). At this time, leading Nazis clashed over the importance of key ideological concepts within the movement, such as anti-capitalism, nationalism, anti-Semitism, or racism. Most notably Otto Strasser, a highly prominent leader of the Nazi Stormtroopers (Sturmabteilung, or SA), split off from the rest of the party and created his own organization (for a more detailed discussion of Strasser and the conflict within the highest Nazi ranks, see Section B2.2 in the Bonus Chapter, on Richard Scheringer). Crüger and most of his HJ comrades followed Strasser into an ideological position closer to socialism and communism, but still very much based in ultra-nationalism (a hybrid he himself called “National Communism”). This development allowed for better contacts with fully committed German communists, for example, during debates over ideological and philosophical topics (Crüger, 1998, pp.

81–89). Through gradually increasing his study of Communist literature and exchanges with communists, Crüger realized that for him only a full commitment to a proletarian revolution on the side of the working class made sense. Hence, he completely moved over to the Communist Party via ideological intermediate hybrid steps. This, however, was not the end of his side-switching storyline. Herbert Crüger was recruited by the underground communist intelligence bureau to re-infiltrate the Nazi SA and spread anti-Nazi propaganda within it, which he incredibly was able to do before being detected and arrested in 1934 (Crüger, 1998, pp. 132–143).

As for a modern-era context with a focus on extremist movements in Western countries, the only currently available rough indication of how common or uncommon side-switching might be is hidden in the “Profiles of Individual Radicalization in the United States” (PIRUS) database compiled and administrated by the National Consortium for the Study of Terrorism and Responses to Terrorism (START) at the University of Maryland. This groundbreaking collection of biographical data for the currently 2,226 violent extremists and terrorists who were active in the USA between 1948 and 2019 fortunately includes the variable “Other Ideologies” in the “Mindset Prior to Radicalization” section. Since the data set includes four different kinds of violent extremist ideologies (far right, far left, “Islamist,” and single issue), we can assume that one of these ideologies was visible first before turning to another one. Unfortunately, the researchers who collected this treasure trove of data did not go into detail here and merely checked “yes” or “no” if “prior to their date of exposure” there is “evidence that the individual adhered to another ideology or movement besides the one in which he/she became radicalized” (START, 2018, p. 46).

What the PIRUS database shows is that a total of 65 individuals were coded positive for other prior ideologies (8 unknown and 2.153 negative), meaning that within the PIRUS sample merely around 2.9 percent can be considered side-switchers. Only three of them are women, which means that only 4.6 percent of the side-switchers compared to 10.1 percent of the non-switchers are female. It appears that transitioning between hostile milieus is a predominantly male phenomenon, even more so than activism in extremist environments already is (see Section 5.8). Next, we can figure out which groups and ideologies the switchers transitioned to up to the date of data collection: 18 (27.7 percent) side-switchers turned to “Islamism” (compared to 22.9 percent of non-switchers who are classified as “Islamists”); 25 (38.5 percent) side-switchers turned to far-right ideologies (compared to 43.9 percent of non-switchers who are classified as far-right extremists); 17 (26.2 percent) side-switchers turned to the far left (compared to 16.6 percent of non-switchers who are classified as far-left extremists); and 5 (7.7 percent) side-switchers turned to single-issue extremism (compared to 16.6 percent of their comparison group

of single-issue extremists among non-switchers). One might quickly jump to the conclusion that these descriptive statistics indicate strong and significant patterns. Obviously, more side-switchers join far-right ideologies than other extremist ideologies but only the far-left and single-issue groups are over-represented (in the case of the far left) or underrepresented (in the case of single issue extremism). Statistical tools designed to differentiate between seemingly clear patterns and random distribution (in this case the so-called Mann-Whitney-U-Test) show us that gender and direction of ideological transition are not statistically significant, unfortunately.

Of course, there are many more variables (e.g., mental health issues, involvement in violent plots, severity of criminal acts, status in extremist group) that we could look at to identify potential links to the side-switcher subsample. The biggest problem with interpreting the PIRUS data in this context lies in the lack of information regarding when exactly the side-switching took place and how the coded individual's other variables changed with the shift in ideologies. This creates significant problems if one wants to understand side-switching across extremist milieus.

To give an example: One can group different mental health variables from PIRUS into a single index (i.e., child abuse, adult abuse, psychological issues, and trauma) because it is possible to suspect that a person with severe mental health problems could be more susceptible to outside influence or look for ways to achieve a higher status. Indeed, the sample shows us that 41.5 percent of side-switchers (27 out of 65) rank positive for at least one of these mental health variables, whereas only 18.6 percent of non-switchers rank positive for at least one variable. Mental health problems appear to be somehow connected to side-switching. However, since we do not know if the trauma or abuse happened before or after the side-switching, we have no way to explain this relation. A person could be more open to defection due to a certain mental health condition or the trauma could have happened years after the transition and be completely unrelated. We simply cannot tell and that is why further statistical analyses to describe the strength and significance of the relationship between side-switching and other variables in the PIRUS database cannot be conducted. Stunningly, the researchers behind PIRUS took notice of this phenomenon and hence included it in their data set, but they did not venture to explore it in any more detail. Still, by the PIRUS account moving between hostile extremist milieus is indeed a rarity. Those 3 percent, however, should not be dismissed easily. They could have had significant careers and lasting impact in the groups they joined, if one of the key assumptions of my work holds some truth: In order to mitigate the risks of extremist side-switching, defectors need to prove to their new group that they can be trusted and that they are now more convinced of the ideological cause than before. This might

push them much further in their radicalization processes and lead to more influential positions, crimes, violence, or recruitment.

When I revisited the original article that kindled my interest in this particular phenomenon, I realized that many more case studies of extremist side-switchers exist but not in an equally distributed way. It seems that transitions between these ideologies and their attached milieus do not work in every direction with the same ease, if one can speak of “easy” side-switching at all. Hence, I began to speculate if those narratives of defectors could reveal more information about ideological connections or tunnels of sort between them that might work in distinct directions. In continuation of my initial research, I wanted to learn more about those questions that kept coming back to me: *How are acts of extremist side-switching across hostile groups possible? How is it, that these individuals not only manage to shift between groups that are actively fighting each other, but also to successfully enter the new group, gain trust of the group’s members and even rise to fame and power within them? How is it that they are not branded as traitors, unreliable opportunists, or potential spies? Why are side-switchers between certain milieus and into certain ideological directions seemingly more common than others and what does this reveal about the ideological connections between them? In short, how and why do they do it?* Ultimately, I also came to realize that side-switchers could provide us with a unique peek at the ideological “road map” between extremist ideologies, which might help us to differentiate between mutual “highways” or “one-way” streets.

It is not surprising that extremist and terrorist milieus are difficult to penetrate for researchers. Those groups typically do not welcome outsiders if they have no intention to join their cause or promise to hold some kind of benefit for them. In an ideal (academic) world, it would be possible to observe side-switching while it occurs and develops from both sides, interview all the involved persons, receive fully honest and truthful answers, and study its impact over the course of years. Few things are further from reality, as many of my fellow researchers know and have painstakingly pondered about for ages, trying to find alternative ways to collect viable data with such hard-to-reach milieus. This book aims to place the personal accounts and stories of side-switchers at the center of the analysis. I will attempt to let the life stories and narratives of the defectors themselves form the basis of our attempt to explore these radical shifts. Therefore, I searched widely for existing interviews, self-written articles, court statements, and autobiographies authored by defectors that mention and possibly even recount the events that led to switching sides, as well as what happened afterward. Sometimes, these accounts have been passed on by other observers who spoke with the side-switchers or had access to their peers. The cases presented here are by no means an exhaustive list of side-switchers nor can I draw any generally

representative claims about them from the sample. I will discuss the methodological constraints and focus of my research in the Chapter 1 in detail, but it can be said here that I wanted to let the side-switcher storylines speak for themselves as much as possible.

Of course, I do not mean to claim that their narratives are factually truthful accounts. Especially when side-switchers tell the story of their defection while still being an active member of their newfound (extremist) group, it is certainly not a good idea to say anything positive about their membership in the hostile previous environment. Naturally, defectors have a strong interest in painting the group they ended up with in the most coaxing way and the group of origin in the most deprecatory terms. I am interested in analyzing how side-switchers present these radical shifts in their own lives and through their own words. In short, when I began my research on extremist side-switchers, I wanted to understand what narrative strategies they use to convince their new group to accept them. The benefit of assessing such self-narratives in this light was pointed out by Altier, Horgan, and Thoroughgood (2012, pp. 89–90) in much wiser words than I could hope to produce here: “By letting the terrorists and former terrorists ‘speak for themselves,’ the approach increases the likelihood that the data one obtains are valid and meaningful representations of the attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of those involved in terrorism, and that they are reliable reflections of the mindset of participants at that particular point in their developmental trajectory . . . However . . . these primary source materials are . . . often more revealing than the author necessarily intends.” By using these accounts provided by violent extremists and terrorists themselves, researchers might learn to “understand how terrorists construct their social realities, interpret their environments, and make critical life decisions,” which are “shaped by their unique cognitive interpretations of the world” (Altier et al., 2012, p. 90).

With this book I therefore aim to contribute the theoretical basis for understanding extremist side-switching and its implications to the study of radicalization, extremism, terrorism, and deradicalization. Beyond the individual level analysis, to explore defections among extremist milieus also provides us with a unique and rare opportunity to catch a glimpse at the mutual interaction between extremist groups and their members. We can study the strategies of coping with internal conflict and the psychological as well as ideological relationships between hostile movements. This might allow us to learn about failed (on the side of the abandoned group) and successful (on the side of the joined group) “human resource management” in extremism and terrorism. This in turn holds the promise of producing significant insights that might prove immensely valuable in preventing and fighting terrorism, extremism, and violent radicalization.

The book explores extremist side-switching through the life stories of individual defectors in the following seven chapters. Chapter 1 mainly dives into existing research on anything related to extremist side-switching; the development and change of political attitudes; the psychology of migration between social groups and disengagement from terrorism; as well as civil wars, where, it seems, so-called fratricidal flipping is not uncommon. This chapter also discusses the main assumptions of the book and briefly introduces us to the main concepts and theories I use for the analysis to follow, for example, Social Identity Theory (SIT), the Five Stage Model (FSM), the Choice Blindness paradigm, and sacred values. We will also learn how I understand the key terms used throughout this study, such as “extremism,” the “far right,” or “radicalization,” as well as which methodology I used to translate accounts and life stories into meaningful analysis.

Chapter 2 then looks at biographical accounts of individuals who joined the far-right milieu, all of whom were previously active in far-left environments. In Chapter 3, I will turn the perspective around and introduce us to several storylines by persons who joined extreme left groups and milieus, coming from neo-Nazi or other far-right backgrounds. In Chapter 4, I will focus on those who decided to convert to Islam and join Islamic extremist or jihadist groups during their personal development. Here we will see a dominance of individuals coming from far-right groups but also, in one case, from left-wing terrorism. This chapter includes a discussion about the peculiarities of extremist side-switching processes that overlap with religious conversion and a potential explanation of why so few cases of defectors from Islamic extremist milieus to one of the other two exist.

Chapter 5 will bring the main findings of the book together and formulate key components of a theory of cross-ideological extremist side-switching, which also involves a discussion of the role of the group versus the individual, the impact of gender, and specific ideological “highways” between extremist environments. Finally, before the conclusion, Chapter 6 will apply what we have learned about extremist side-switching to the field of preventing and countering extremism, which also includes disengagement and deradicalization, to better understand what makes defectors different from those who exit extremism completely, and how this could help us to improve existing programs and strategies to counter the threat of extremism and terrorism around the world.

During the process of collecting and researching side-switching accounts for this book, I came along so many fascinating and stunning biographies that it was impossible to include them all here. Thanks to Cambridge University Press, some of these most interesting cases will be available in an online-only Bonus Chapter, downloadable for free at www.cambridge.org/koehler. The Bonus Chapter, to which I will refer here occasionally, mainly extends the

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focus of the book to (German) intellectual defectors from the extreme left who joined the extreme right on the one hand, as well as additional historical and court case studies on the other. Those intellectual side-switchers provide examples of highly ideological group and milieu transition, as they mostly (but not entirely) refrained from criminal activities. Nevertheless, they changed their ideological positions fundamentally while always clearly remaining “extremist” and lending their intellectual support to a violent cause. The Bonus Chapter also takes an in-depth look at the biographies of Benito Mussolini and German army officer Richard Scheringer, who both switched sides in the era between the two World Wars. Finally, the Bonus Chapter presents two additional court cases from the United States (Joseph Brice and Nicholas Young), who changed their main ideological affiliation from the extreme right to jihadist.

Acknowledgments

Writing a book even in the most ordinary of times is always a challenge and an exceptional exercise in perseverance. How to find the mental focus to consistently put the words on paper every minute, hour, day, or week in a row until they (hopefully) form meaningful sentences, paragraphs, and chapters has been an enigma for many authors. If one actually reads the acknowledgment sections of academic books in particular, we learn about at least one secret ingredient for productive (and healthy) writing: the reliance on friends and colleagues who provide a stable, encouraging, and supportive social environment. Indeed, I have found this to be true and invaluable for the books I have written before. But this one was different. I started to work on it in March 2020, right when the world was entering the first stage of a global pandemic, hard lockdowns, and widespread uncertainty about the duration and consequences of this rapidly spreading disease named COVID-19. In times like these when the world appears to be going up in flames (and in no small part due to some deliberately pouring gasoline on it), social networks the way we knew them are shattered, putting us all to the test to accomplish even the basic day-to-day tasks. Too many lost their loved ones, their jobs, or indeed their lives. How can anyone expect friends and colleagues to provide emotional or professional support for a book in such exceptional times when we were all strained to the limit?

I have found that, albeit invaluable as it is, direct support from friends and colleagues through feedback, exchange, or the occasional distraction to get back on track is not the only gift to be thankful for when it comes to acknowledging those who contributed in one way or the other. More than ever, I felt inspired by those academic and nonacademic heroes of mine, who master their own everyday challenges with dignity, respect, love, compassion, and commitment to their families, their responsibilities, and the world around them.

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Through this book I have learned (yet again), that there are no psychological and physical barriers too high, no changes too fundamental, and no supposedly eternal enmity too existential for human beings to overcome. For some, this human ability to adapt and literally jump right over one's own shadow leads further down the path to their personal purgatory. For others, it becomes their lifesaver.

To paraphrase a wise popular culture character: I firmly believe that we all have to face the truth and choose. Give off light, or darkness. Be a candle, or the night.