1 Betraying the Cause?
Side-Switching and Violent Extremism

In November 2011, two German neo-Nazis conducted a successful bank robbery in the small town of Eisenach and – as they had done many times before – began waiting out the manhunt by the police in a rental caravan parked nearby. By coincidence, Uwe Böhnhardt (1977–2011) and Uwe Mundlos (1973–2011) were observed loading their mountain bikes into the caravan and soon after a police patrol closed in on the duo to investigate the situation. By monitoring police radio, Mundlos and Böhnhardt knew that they were cornered and before the officers could enter the vehicle, they set fire to the caravan and committed suicide. Roughly at the same time a third person, Beate Zschäpe, began pouring out a combustible liquid in her apartment in the town of Jena, about 100 kilometers away. After igniting the material, an explosion rocked and destroyed large parts of the building. In the debris of the caravan and the apartment, investigators quickly discovered cash and multiple weapons, one of which could be tied to an attack on two police officers in April 2007, leaving one officer dead. Zschäpe was on the run, seemingly aimless, and mailed out copies of a DVD-video to different journalists, politicians, and one extreme-right company.

It took the authorities a couple of days to understand the importance of these connected events, leading to a shattering of the German security infrastructure that was called "our September 11" (FAZ, 2012) by then–Federal Prosecutor General Harald Range. On the video Zschäpe sent out, a group calling itself the "National Socialist Underground" (Nationalsozialistischer Untergrund, or NSU) claimed responsibility for the murders of nine shopkeepers with Turkish and Greek background, as well as one police officer. The NSU had financed itself through bank robberies (15 in total) and not only assassinated victims by shooting them at point blank range but the group also conducted at least three bomb attacks targeting neighborhoods with a large percentage of minorities. Forming the core of the NSU, the trio had been living underground and pursuing its terrorist agenda since 1998, and at no point did the authorities manage to even suspect their involvement in the murders and bombings, which happened across Germany. Because of this grave failure to detect the group, a wave of shock and outrage swept across the country. Until July 2013, six

directors or deputy directors of various intelligence agencies resigned or were removed from their posts. A total of nine parliamentary inquiry commissions (one on the federal and eight on the state level) investigating the reasons for this counterterrorism failure were set up and began their years-long work (Koehler, 2016a). On November 8, 2011, Beate Zschäpe was arrested after turning herself in and charged exactly one year later. She, too, is a side-switcher into the far-right environment.

Between May 2013 and July 2018, the longest trial in post–Second World War German history led to a guilty verdict for Beate Zschäpe, who had been charged with four coconspirators, on the counts of 10 murders, 32 attempted murders, and membership in a terrorist organization (among other charges). Her role in the core cell is still debated, as her claim to not have been involved in the attacks of the other two, now deceased, members is disputable. Still, Zschäpe never was present at any of the attack sites and her involvement seems to have been maintaining group solidarity and logistics. As the trial has produced extensive evidence about her life and radicalization process, it is comparatively easy to trace her steps into the terrorist underground.

Born in January 1975 in Jena, the only daughter of her mother, Zschäpe was mainly raised by her grandmother and never knew her father, a Rumanian student. He had met Zschäpe's mother during her university studies in dental medicine. Beate Zschäpe experienced two divorces and moved six times during her childhood until the age of 15, accounting for a quite unsteady life (Baumgärtner & Böttcher, 2012; Fuchs & Goetz, 2012). In 1991, she left school and finished her vocational training as a gardener between 1992 and 1996. Her involvement in politically extremist and violent youth gangs had started at the age of 14, around 1989, in the turmoil of the German Democratic Republic's (the socialist East German state, or GDR) demise and the country's reunification. In those years, much of the social infrastructure in the East (e.g., youth clubs, sports associations) were disbanded and state authorities largely withdrew from the public realm for a couple of years. This left a vacuum for many extremist entrepreneurs to form new groups, mostly youth gangs, across the territory of the former GDR. Even though dominated by far-right skinhead subculture, there were also forms of left-wing activism. Many teenagers found themselves without a perspective and looking for direction.

Zschäpe joined an openly far-left punker group called "The Ticks" (Die Zecken), a reference to a widely used slur by right-wing skinheads against their left opponents. Even though Zschäpe's group also included unpolitical teenagers simply looking to have fun with peers, she actively participated in planning and conducting an attack against a youth club known for harboring neo-Nazi skinheads. In those early years of her political activism, she was described as thirsty for experiencing life, frequenting left-wing alternative discotheques and enjoying reggae and ska music (Fuchs, 2012; Fuchs &

Goetz, 2012, p. 59). Being an alternative leftist adolescent in these years was risky in many parts of Germany. A wave of far-right violence swept over the country in the first years after the reunification in 1990. Neo-Nazi skinheads regularly attacked left-wing youths, often with unrestricted and sometimes fatal violence.

Zschäpe had found a boyfriend in her first youth group, a left-wing punker, with whom she engaged in acts of petty crime. At the age of 16, in late 1991, she met Uwe Mundlos and the two fell in love. Together they broke into a far-right youth club and stole money, as well as cigarettes. Mundlos, who would later become one of the three core members in the NSU trio, also considered himself to be a left-wing skinhead for some years. Asked in school about why he was a neo-Nazi, Mundlos reportedly answered: "I am not right, I am left – my combat boots have red laces in it!" (original in German, translated by author, as cited in Fuchs & Goetz, 2012, p. 68). However, it appears that Mundlos was mainly driven by a desire for provocation and rebellion, as he also expressed his anger against the socialist system and the Soviet Union by drawing swastikas into schoolboards when he began his involvement in the skinhead milieu around 1988 – two years before the reunification (Fuchs & Goetz, 2012, pp. 67–68).

In the last years of the East German GDR, youth subcultures deemed antisocial by the regime began to appear en masse. While the far-left-oriented groups based their rebellion against the system on defying social norms regarding work, education, and so-called proper appearance, the far right hit the nerve of the legally mandated anti-fascist state by showing open allegiance with National Socialism and Fascism (Ross, 2000). Zschäpe and Mundlos got engaged before he served in the Germany army as part of the mandatory conscription between April 1994 and March 1995. The couple had by then become integrated into the local neo-Nazi environment, especially by regularly visiting a youth club heavily frequented by the far right. It was there the trio came into existence, by meeting the third later terrorist Uwe Böhnhardt. While Mundlos was away in the military, Zschäpe broke up with him and began a relationship with his best friend, Böhnhardt.

Circling back a few years to Zschäpe's story, she had entered the local neo-Nazi movement between 1991 and 1992. Her integration into the far-right milieu was swift and facilitated by her new boyfriend Mundlos, who by that time had already become a right-wing extremist. Breaking into the far-right youth club with Zschäpe might be seen as an attempt to impress her with his uncompromising search for rebellion and adventure. Soon, Zschäpe participated in and even organized some neo-Nazi rallies. Her violent crimes increased rapidly and were mostly directed against left-wing activists and minorities. However, she also was not a stereotypical right-wing extremist, as her heavy use of drugs was noted by intelligence operatives who probed to recruit her as a potential informant (Jüttner, 2013). Upon the return of her

former future husband from the military in 1995, the trio was complete again and significantly radicalized in the following months and years.

Mundlos had evolved into a fully committed National Socialist. His goal was to educate and harden the small group ideologically. At first, Mundlos was furious about the relationship between Zschäpe and Böhnhardt but friends from that time recount his unwillingness to abandon the two, arguably out of still very strong feelings for his former fiancée (Fuchs & Goetz, 2012, pp. 106–107). The trio became inseparable and gradually stepped up their violence and preparations for serious attacks. In October 1996, for example, the group was responsible for depositing a fake bomb with a swastika painted on it on a sports field, not the first of its kind. In November 1996, the trio, together with other neo-Nazis, visited the Buchenwald concentration camp memorial wearing uniforms mimicking Nazi storm troopers. In early 1997, they began mailing out nonfunctional letter bombs, which contained small amounts of explosives but no ignition mechanism. Zschäpe had rented a small garage, which the three used to store their bomb-making equipment and prepare the explosives. After a police search in January 1998, which turned up several pipe bombs and TNT explosives, the trio went underground and began their new life as an organized clandestine far-right terror cell until their detection by accident 13 years later.

From what is known, Beate Zschäpe and Uwe Mundlos were not fully committed and convinced far-left activists. Both rather looked for community, social status, adventure, and rebellion. Zschäpe appears to have been more interested in enjoying the lifestyle with the occasional thrill of breaking the law. Her anchor in the left-wing group was comprised of friendships and her romantic relationship with another member. Mundlos on the other hand is described by many former friends and bystanders as intelligent but having been driven toward constant provocation and conflict. His transition to the far right was much more fluent and it is questionable whether he ever truly considered himself to be a left-wing skinhead. It should not be discounted too quickly, however, that Zschäpe was part of a group in constant fear of being attacked by neo-Nazis. Her participation in the violent raid on the far-right youth club was likely both joining in on the action with her peers and returning some of the terror inflicted upon alternative youths by their omni-present enemies: right-wing skinheads.

The biographies of Zschäpe and to some degree Mundlos lead us to a different form of side-switching with grave consequences. Commitment and integration into an extremist milieu do not automatically have to be based on ideological convictions. It can be, and arguably even more often is, fueled by the desire to belong to a group, for social status and recognition, friendships, fun, and adventure instead of following the doctrines set by the underlying

ideology. Naturally, this is more likely the case with youth groups, which might claim a crude politically connotated collective identity, but are usually more focused on addressing the everyday needs of their members. Nevertheless, the ideological conviction can develop either in the original milieu or the one after the defection. Beate Zschäpe's radical career neatly alerts us to some of the many complex and overlapping factors we need to understand when studying violent and nonviolent extremism, radicalization, and defection processes, as well as the development and change of political attitudes. By using these terms, I am very conscious that I tap into questions about human nature and behavior, which are immensely controversial and heatedly debated, for example, among academics and policy makers. Hence, clarification about how I understand the key terms and concepts I will use throughout this book is warranted. This chapter will also introduce the body of research from different academic fields, such as social psychology, terrorism, and civil war studies, which formed the basis of my attempt to make sense of extremist side-switching.

1.1 Extremism

Naturally, "extremism" is one of the most fundamental terms of this book, which after all focuses explicitly on those persons switching between hostile extremist and terrorist groups. The term is widely used to describe specific ideologies defining themselves through a maximum degree of opposition to a certain mainstream or political center. That meaning is already attached to its epistemology with the combination of the Latin root *extremus*, meaning "situated at the end, edge, or tip; occurring at the end (of a period of time), last; or something extreme in degree," with the suffix "ism" signaling a specific practice, system, or philosophy. In that sense, extremism is a relational concept reflecting ideological distance and dependency at the same time (Vermeulen & Bovenkerk, 2012, p. 48). Logically, this means that any opposition to the mainstream center would be extremism, regardless of the moral justification behind its actions or ideological positions. This has led to some more specific definitions of extremism containing the opposition against pluralism, rule of law and self-determination by a population (Backes, 2009), or the curtailment of individual liberties justified by a total will to power (Midlarsky, 2011).

Provocatively turning this argument around: Anything other than a Western concept of democracy can be called extremism, which is a criticism fielded against this term by scholars, activists, politicians, and social movements alike who see themselves criminalized and stigmatized as "extremists" in the name of moral judgments against nondemocratic political philosophies. Furthermore, "extremism" is also the main concept interlocked with the term

"radicalization," providing the ideological core to the latter. These two characteristics of how the term "extremism" is used most widely establish its thoroughly negative and condemning effects. On a more differentiated level, extremism is typically discussed along two qualifying lines: violent vs. nonviolent manifestations on the one hand and attitudes vs. behavior on the other. Nevertheless, most casual, and nonacademic applications of the term go hand in hand with equaling violent extremism to terrorism explicitly, leaving aside the fact that variations occur and not all extremists are violent, for example.

To avoid a potentially endless circle of debates focusing on the legitimacy of specific political concepts and forms of government as the core of what is extremist and what is not, I will follow Berger's (2018) most valuable alternative approach to the term. His understanding of "extremism" essentially focuses on the importance of in-group bias and hostility toward a defined other or enemy: "Extremism refers to the belief that an in-group's success or survival can never be separated from the need for hostile action against an out-group. The hostile action must be part of the in-group's definition of success. Hostile acts can range from verbal attacks and diminishment to discriminatory behavior, violence, and even genocide" (Berger, 2018, p. 44). Extremist milieus require an "unwavering commitment" (Berger, 2018, p. 33) to that out-group hostility as the group could not exist or be triumphant without it. It is therefore the inseparability of that enmity against outsiders from the very nature of what the underlying ideology is all about that characterizes extremism. As I will show with the many biographical case studies of extremist side-switchers throughout this book, it is most often that fiery hostility to a very specific out-group shared by various extremist groups, even among those interlocked in direct opposition to each other, that creates a basis for successful defection narratives.

In this book I will often use "extremist" and "terrorist" as a pair. Of course, I am aware that "extremism" and "terrorism" are two very different phenomena; the first being a thought system and the latter a tactic. In addition, many of the individual side-switchers I will look at have not been involved in terrorist activities or even violence. In my perspective, I see a dynamic and fluent escalation between being a radical, a nonviolent extremist, a violent extremist, and a terrorist. However, only a minority of radicals will turn out to be extremists and only a minority of them will move to violence and terrorism in their radicalization processes. Luckily, the majority either remains at a nonviolent stage or quits before turning to violence. Nevertheless, I want to include violent and nonviolent forms of extremism in my account of side-switching, as I regard the common psychological element to be the inseparability of hostility toward an out-group from the collective and individual identities of the defectors and their milieus.

1.2 Radicalization, Radicalism, and Being a Radical

The controversial term "radicalization" fully entered the academic and public discourses after the London terror attacks on July 7, 2005 (Sedgwick, 2010), replacing "root causes" of terrorism (Neumann, 2008, p. 4). Usually, the concept describes a "process by which an individual adopts an extremist ideology" (Braddock, 2014, p. 62). Whether or not the use of violence is a key aspect of radicalization remains contested. The European Commission for example sees radicalization as a process of "embracing opinions, views and ideas which could lead to acts of terrorism" (Reinares et al., 2008, p. 5). Similarly focusing on the aspect of violence, Bosi et al. understand it as "a process forming through strategy, structure, and conjuncture, and involving the adoption and sustained use of violent means to achieve articulated political goals" (Bosi, Demetriou & Malthaner, 2014, p. 2).

Other scholars have argued that we must differentiate between violent and nonviolent forms of radicalization (Bartlett & Miller, 2012; Jaskoski, Wilson & Lazareno, 2017) and even recognize that benevolent forms of this phenomenon exist (Reidy, 2018). Therefore, nonviolent radicalization can be seen as "the social and psychological process of incrementally experienced commitment to extremist political or religious ideology" (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 152). This means that: "radicalization may not necessarily lead to violence, but is one of several risk factors required for this" (Horgan & Braddock, 2010, p. 152). Alternatively, some scholars have argued to speak of "cognitive" (focusing on extremist beliefs) and "behavioral" radicalization (focusing on extremist actions) (Neumann, 2013).

In the decades after the September 11 attacks, an almost unmanageable amount of research has been conducted on the potential causes of radicalization, its phases and steps, potential risk factors, or links with mental health issues. Numerous meta-studies have attempted to summarize the state of the academic discourse at various times (e.g., Borum, 2011a, 2011b; Christmann, 2012; Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Horgan, 2008; Reinares et al., 2008), but a particularly useful one was provided by Gøtzsche-Astrup (2018), focusing on the empirical validity within radicalization research. In his perspective, strong empirical evidence points to radicalization as a normal psychological mechanism rather than psychopathology. He also sees enough support in the literature to focus on motivational processes rather than instrumental calculations of risk and reward, as well as negative life experiences that put the individual in flux in terms of fundamental questions. Experiences of fundamental uncertainty or loss of meaning or significance, shift in social identity toward a single social group rather than many, and small-group dynamics driving the process to behavioral extremes are equally key to

understanding the term and its underlying process. Finally, Gøtzsche-Astrup highlights a heightened dispositional anxiety, aggression and impulsivity, and the role of "sacred values" in developing extremist attitudes and action.

One way to define the core of radicalization beyond the use of violence is the individual's motive to fundamentally alter the surrounding environment. In this regard, Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) have suggested introducing the concept of "activism" as the legal counterpart to illegal "radicalism." Echoing this notion, Dalgaard-Nielsen defines "radicalization" as "a growing readiness to pursue and support far-reaching changes in society that conflict with, or pose a direct threat to, the existing order" (Dalgaard-Nielsen, 2010, p. 798). As noted by Pisoiu (2011, p. 12), most definitions actually describe a result, rather than the process or mechanism of radicalization as such, suggesting that one should understand "radicalism" as a "political ideology with the objective of inducing sweeping change based on fundamental or 'root' principles" (Pisoiu, 2011, p. 23). This means, that being radical implies a twofold state of mind: on the one hand a growing desire for (fundamental) change and on the other an increasing importance of "root" or fundamental principles, which is already indicated in the word's Latin origin: *radix* meaning "root" or "base." Furthermore, numerous process models of radicalization trajectories have been developed to show the different phases and motivational mechanisms in each step (for an overview see Christmann, 2012). All these models point to the fact that individual radicalization pathways are gradual processes spanning over a certain time period that involve different cognitive and behavioral steps one must take toward an end state that could be classified as extremist.

My own conceptualization of radicalization (Koehler, 2016b, pp. 65–94) understands the phenomenon as a process of individual de-pluralization of political concepts and values (e.g., justice, freedom, honor, violence, democracy) on the one hand, and an increase in ideological urgency to act against an individual or collective problem on the other. With a higher degree of individual internalization of the notion that no other alternative interpretations of the (individually prioritized) political concepts and values exist (or are relevant), one can show (e.g., in syntax, language, and behavior) the progression of the radicalization process toward a mindset that is fully exclusive and relies on existential conflict for social and individual identity as laid out in the extremism concept by Berger (2018). This internalization of ideologically framed political concepts and problems can be emotional and/or intellectual as I will also describe in detail in the following discussion of the term "ideology."

1.3 Ideology

The third most important and contested term I am using in this book is "ideology." This comes as a necessity, since I am interested in those

side-switchers crossing between groups I define as mutually exclusive and hostile on an ideological basis. The term is extensively used, for example, in political theory, political psychology, terrorism, or historical research to differentiate between different types of terrorist groups and political movements. Most often, "ideology" is equaled to something like a set of mobilizing beliefs and worldviews structuring attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Feldman, 2013; Hoffman, 2006; Kalmoe, 2020; Sageman, 2004; Snow, 2004). This functionalist approach to ideology assumes that these beliefs contain consciously or unconsciously held values, understandings, interpretations, myths, or preferences in regard to political action and processes used to formulate a rationale for political action (for the roots of this understanding see Hamilton, 1987; W. A. Mullins, 1972).

Ideology also tends to create an association with a movement, party, or group. As a much discussed and criticized concept in social movement research, one suggestion to define the term is as a "variable phenomenon that ranges on a continuum from a tightly and rigidly connected set of values and beliefs at one end to a loosely coupled set of values and beliefs on the other end, and that can function, in either case, as both a constraint on and a resource for the kind of sense-making, interpretive work associated with framing" (Snow, 2004, p. 400). I argue that this understanding of ideology is too shallow and too much focused on an intellectual reflection and awareness of those "beliefs" forming a system somehow. Most importantly, it almost completely ignores the emotional side of ideology and does not help us understand why and how some ideologies are mutually exclusive or even toxic to each other.

In my studies of extremism, terrorism, radicalization, and deradicalization, I have found the seminal work of Michael Freeden (e.g., 1994, 1996) in establishing a morphological study of ideologies to be an exceptionally valuable way of looking at the term. Freeden describes ideologies as "an organizing frame of reference for action-oriented political thinking" and "thought-edifices which serve to organize their perceptions of their political environments, to direct them towards certain types of political conduct, and to provide or support plans of action for public political institutions" (Freeden, 1994, p. 140). He adds to this an understanding of ideologies as "particular patterned clusters and configurations of political concepts. An ideology is hence none other than the macroscopic structural arrangement that attributes meaning to a range of mutually defining political concepts" (Freeden, 1994, p. 141).

These political concepts are "complex entities that inject order and meaning into observed sets of political phenomena and hold together an assortment of connected ideas . . . their mode of employment is subject only to the test of acceptability to significant numbers of their users" (Freeden, 1994, p. 141) and, for example, take the form of words like "justice," "freedom," "power," "rights," "equality," or "democracy." Such concepts can be found at the core

of every ideology but are characteristically organized and clustered, creating something like an ideological fingerprint, consisting not only of the cluster of political concepts, but also of those concepts culturally and logical adjacent to it. Naturally, these political concepts are not static but very much fluid and allow for a variety of linguistic and cultural meanings to be attached to them (Freeden, 1994, p. 154).

A major function of an ideology is to "cement the word–concept relationship" and to "attach a single meaning to a political term" (Freeden, 1994, p. 156). Thus, every ideology strives to decontest the range of meanings that can possibly be attached to central political concepts. "Decontestation" is of course not only a function of extremist but of every ideology, thus making it possible to recognize what competing ideologies actually are: "struggles over the legitimate meanings of political concepts and the sustaining arrangements they form" (Freeden, 1994, p. 156). Following what we have seen about the nature of "extremism" and "radicalization," namely that they include by definition almost completely exclusive definitions of central political concepts, we can now recognize that these extremist milieus and their followers are engaged in ideological struggles about the meaning of fundamental aspects of human life. The mutual exclusivity of extremist ideologies is defined here as the inherent incompatibility of each ideology's core concepts with the opposing one. For an example, one central feature of many far-right extremist ideologies is the claim that racial differences between human beings account for their cultural and biological value; mixing of races automatically leads to conflicts and deterioration of societies. Many far-left extremist ideologies not only fiercely contest this understanding of human conflict and societal problems but also argue for socioeconomic class struggle as the main reason behind all negative aspects of humanity. The question is much more than "race vs. class." Both ideologies have an ideological core "DNA" that negates each other's existence. However, Freeden maintains that ideologies are dynamic and flexible systems, which constantly change and adapt, especially regarding the more adjacent, cultural, and peripheral concepts attached to the core.

A second essential perspective on ideologies in addition to Freeden's concept of ideological morphology is the approach by Martin Seliger (1976). His work forms the foundation of what I call the ideological triangle, which explains the main psychological levels of effect on individuals and collective entities. All ideologies, according to Seliger, must have a problem definition with a viewpoint on existing order and power structures, a proposed solution to the problem, and a future vision in order to develop into fully functioning and self-enforcing systems of ideas. Each angle of the triangle, I argue, contains specifically arranged political concepts in the sense of Freeden's morphology that establish meaning and efficacy to each other. For example, a right-wing extremist ideology might stipulate the supremacy of the "Aryan" race and the