

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION (AWD)

IMPACT: Atomwaffen Division (AWD) is an American neo-Nazi group that espouses virulent racism, antisemitism, misogyny, and homophobia. With approximately 50 to 80 members nationwide, AWD's strategy is to engage in acts of violence to destabilize society and provoke a 'race war.' Five murders between 2017 and 2019 have been attributed to AWD. Following multiple arrests by the FBI and speculation about possible designation of the group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO) by the U.S. State Department, AWD allegedly disbanded in March 2020.

- In October 2015, **Brandon Russell of Tampa, Florida, founded Atomwaffen Division (AWD) by posting a thread on the now-defunct neo-Nazi, online forum Iron March**. Stating that AWD had been “many years in the making,” **Russell described AWD as a “very fanatical, ideological band of comrades who do both activism and militant training.”** He also claimed that AWD “spread[s] awareness in the real world through unconventional means.” “Atomwaffen” is German for “atomic weapons,” and the insignia used by AWD is a Nazi-inspired black shield that displays the symbol for radioactivity.
- AWD founder Russell joined the Florida National Guard in January 2016. **Following the May 2017 double homicide of two of Russell's roommates, Andrew Oneschuk and Jeremy Himmelman, by a third roommate, Devon Arthurs, all of whom were AWD members, police discovered Nazi propaganda and bomb making materials at the residence.** Arthurs reportedly had converted to Islam and sworn allegiance to ISIS, and was offended by Oneschuk and Himmelman making fun of his conversion. Russell was released by Tampa police following the murder, after which point he loaded his car with weapons and ammunition and began driving to the Florida Keys with another AWD member. **Russell was eventually apprehended and arrested and he confessed his involvement with AWD. In January 2018, Russell was sentenced to five years in prison for “possession of an unregistered destructive device and improper storage of explosive materials.”** Arthurs testified that Russell had intended to use the explosive materials “to kill civilians and target locations like power lines, nuclear reactors, and synagogues.” Following Russell's arrest, AWD selected John Cameron Denton of Houston, Texas, and Kaleb Cole of Snohomish County, Washington, to co-lead AWD. **Also following his arrest, the Florida National Guard launched an investigation into Russell's activities while in uniform. As reported by ProPublica in November 2018, the investigators “determined there had been no negligence in allowing Russell into the Guard or in his continued presence in its ranks.”**
- According to an FBI-authored affidavit included in a criminal complaint filed in October 2018 in Los Angeles County, **Azov Battalion, a Ukrainian militia, has provided military training to members of white supremacist organizations based in the United States.** Azov Battalion was formed in 2014 as a response to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine. While they deny that they are a neo-Nazi group, international observers have pointed out Azov Battalion's frequent use of Nazi symbolism and praise of Nazi-collaborators, as well as their founder's goal of “lead[ing] the White Races of the world in a final crusade ... against the Semite-led Untermenschen [subhumans].” **Former AWD member Andrew Oneschuk once appeared on an Azov-produced podcast and planned to travel to Ukraine in order to join Azov and receive training.**
- Estimates of AWD's size vary, with former members claiming there are anywhere from 50 to 80 members. **According to reporting in ProPublica, AWD has cells in 23 states, with the largest and most active in Texas, Virginia, and Washington state.**
- American neo-Nazi **James Mason, the “chief philosophical influence” and advisor of AWD, advocates random violence in order to hasten the collapse of society and allow for the rise of fascism.** According to Mason's writings in Siege, “the final END of society is accelerating” because “the entire foundation itself is thoroughly corroded.” Mason has further argued, “At this juncture social malaise cannot be halted, only accelerated onward to the abyss, capitulating the whole vile episode of this end cycle.” **Mason's book Siege is required reading for all AWD members and functions as their “bible” and “handbook on how to operate.”** In July 2017, AWD members announced that they “were going to help [Mason] resume publishing SIEGE.”
- According to federal documents, **AWD “utilizes a ‘leaderless resistance’ strategy’ in which small independent groups, or individuals called ‘lone wolves,’ try to achieve a common goal of challenging the established laws, social order, and government via terrorism and other violent acts.”** AWD members believe that **the current political, economic, and social systems are unsalvageable and therefore advocate chaos, violence, and destruction as a solution.** As one former member has stated, “Their endgame is simply pure, unadulterated destruction. It is a death cult.” **Additional inspiration for AWD members includes Adolph Hitler and Mein Kampf, Charles Manson, Timothy McVeigh, Dylann Roof, The Turner Diaries, Anders Breivik, and other mass shooters in the U.S. and around the world.**

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION (AWD)

- In 2017 and 2018, members of AWD organized a series of “**Hate Camps**” around the country, **including in Nevada, Illinois, and Texas**. At these gatherings, members engaged in weapons training and hand-to-hand combat practice, and they filmed neo-Nazi propaganda footage. This footage from the trainings, which were **intended to prepare members for guerrilla insurgency and a “race war,”** was then developed into propaganda videos that AWD **posted** on two YouTube channels. Despite being **banned** by YouTube in February 2018, AWD content **continues** to appear on YouTube.
- In February 2018, *ProPublica* **published** an article on AWD that identified several AWD members nationwide. According to the article, several thousand pages of chat logs of AWD communications on Discord, an online chat platform designed for video gamers, were hacked and released to the public. **Following their exposure, several AWD members quit their jobs, relocated, deleted their online profiles, and moved their communications onto Wire, an encrypted communications app.**
- **Former members claim** that AWD specifically recruits current and former members of the military in order to gain access to their weapons training and to create a “paramilitary activist mentality.” **Investigators claim** that AWD ranks **include** three veterans and four current employees of the U.S. armed forces. Two of these have been identified by name. **Vasillios Pistolis**, then an active-duty member of the Marines, was a member of AWD before **leaving** the group in late 2017 due to a dispute. After **seven months passed** since the time that Marines were first notified of Pistolis’ white supremacist activities and memberships, Pistolis was **court martialed and expelled** from the military in July 2018. **A FRONTLINE and ProPublica investigation** identified him as a participant in the 2017 **Unite the Right** rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, who **bragged about assaulting four counter protestors**. Joshua Beckett **served** in the U.S. Army from 2011 to 2015 and reportedly trained AWD members “in firearms and hand-to-hand combat” in fall of 2017. **Beckett encouraged AWD members to join the military for training in order to use it against the U.S. government, which he reportedly believed was “controlled by a secret cabal of Jews.”** On online chats, Beckett **discussed** the people he killed during his combat tour in Afghanistan, whom he referred to using slurs.
- **Between late 2015 and early 2017, AWD’s main public activity was propaganda dissemination. Members hung antisemitic recruitment posters at colleges around the country**, including the [University of Chicago](#), the [University of Central Florida](#), [Boston University](#), the [University of West Florida](#), the [University of Washington](#), and the [University of Pennsylvania](#). Most posters **featured images of Hitler, swastikas, predictions of violent conflict, and the phrase “join your local Nazi’s today.”** AWD postering was also reported in [June 2019](#), when **several antisemitic AWD posters were hung outside of a Jewish cemetery near Detroit.**
- **Since 2017, current members of AWD and people closely associated with AWD have committed five murders in the United States.** In addition to the Tampa-based murders of Oneschuk and Himmelman by Arthurs, in December 2017, **Nicolas Giampa murdered his ex-girlfriend’s parents after they discovered his neo-Nazi beliefs and urged their daughter to break up with him.** Giampa’s [social media](#) accounts urged people to “**#readSIEGE**” and he **frequently retweeted** AWD propaganda. In January 2018, AWD member **Samuel Woodward (20) murdered his former high school classmate Blaze Bernstein, who was a gay, Jewish college student.** According to reporting to *ProPublica*, Woodward **posted** several messages to AWD members on Discord “in the days after Bernstein’s murder, but before he was arrested and charged.” Shortly after Woodward was arrested, AWD members online praised Woodward as a “one man gay Jew wrecking crew.” They also made t-shirts of Woodward with a swastika on his forehead. Woodward is **currently charged** in the state of California with first-degree murder and a hate crime enhancement based on sexual orientation.
- In November 2019, **AWD Virginia cell leader Andrew Thomasberg (21) of McLean, Virginia, who admired the mass shooter of nine African American worshippers in 2015 at Mother Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina, pleaded guilty** to “making a material false statement in relation to the purchase of a firearm and to possessing firearms while being an unlawful user of or addicted to controlled substances.” After reportedly renouncing his white supremacist ideology on the day of his sentencing, Thomasberg was **sentenced** to one year and a day in prison.
- Reports in *The Daily Beast* and *ProPublica* with *FRONTLINE* have **documented** additional **arrests of individuals affiliated with AWD, including a Washington, D.C.-based individual with a connection to the mass shooter of the Tree of Life Synagogue** in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, who **murdered** eleven Jews during Shabbat services in October 2018.

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION (AWD)

- In November 2019, the FBI **arrested Richard Tobin (18) of Brooklawn, New Jersey, for allegedly directing the “Great Lakes cell” of The Base “to target and vandalize synagogues in Michigan and Wisconsin.”** According to reporting in *VICE*, Tobin was also an active member of AWD and “has helped organize propaganda for the group.” Synagogues in Hancock, Michigan, and Racine, Wisconsin, were vandalized one day apart in September 2019 with Nazi swastikas and symbols of The Base.
- In February 2020, AWD member Aiden Bruce-Umbaugh (23) pleaded guilty to “federal charges of smoking weed regularly while possessing guns.” In November 2019, Bruce-Umbaugh was arrested during a traffic stop in Post, Texas. AWD leader Kaleb Cole was also in the vehicle. At the time of his arrest, Bruce-Umbaugh wore tactical gear and possessed a “huge cache of weapons, ammo, a canister of marijuana, and THC oil in the car.” **During an interview with law enforcement, Bruce-Umbaugh stated, “I assume you’re here because of my swastika flag and firearms.” A month prior to being pulled over in Texas, officials in Kings County, Washington, “seized [Cole’s] firearms under the state’s red flag law, arguing that he was preparing for “a race war.”** Previously, in 2015, **Cole was reported to police in Anacortes, Washington state, for “allegedly harassing a Jewish grocery store owner by a waving a Nazi flag in front of the business.”**
- In February 2020, **AWD member Conor Climo (24) pleaded guilty to planning bombings and shootings of a synagogue and LGBTQIA2S+ bar in Las Vegas, Nevada**, as well as to felony possession of an unregistered firearm. Climo’s home contained “hand-drawn schematics and firebomb parts,” as well as a “journal with sketches of mass shootings at a McDonald’s restaurant and LGBTQ bar in a downtown tourist corridor.” **Climo also planned to attack the Las Vegas headquarters of the ADL and posted on message boards that he wanted to “plant neo-Nazi propaganda” inside high schools and middle schools in Nevada and infiltrate “student-run political groups” at the University of Nevada, Reno.** Additionally, Climo had requested to start a local chapter of another white supremacist organization called Traditionalist Worker Party, discussing his goals of “defunding and shutting down Section 8 alongside white community building.”
- **In February 2020, the FBI and local enforcement arrested five alleged members of AWD across the U.S.** According to a Department of Justice (DOJ) press release, four of those five were categorized as “racially motivated violent extremists” and were arrested and charged in U.S District Court in Seattle with “**a conspiracy to threaten and intimidate journalists and activists,**” primarily **Jews and journalists of color, with “intent to cause fear of bodily harm, harass, intimidate, and retaliate against unfavorable reporting.”** All four defendants were under FBI and local law enforcement surveillance during the planning and execution of the attacks. According to the DOJ, two of the defendants, **Kaleb Cole (24) and Cameron Brandon Shea (24) created posters designed with masked Nazi figures, guns, Molotov cocktails, and threatening language.** Cole and Shea sent the posters electronically to AWD members, who then delivered or mailed printed copies of the posters to their targets, including individuals associated with the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), a Puerto Rican journalist, and the editor-in-chief of Arizona Jewish Life magazine.
- In February 2020, the **FBI also arrested former AWD Texas cell leader John Cameron Denton (26) in Montgomery, Texas.** Denton was charged with “conspiracy to commit an offense against the United States [and] interstate threats to injure.” This allegedly included **multiple swatting events against Alfred Street Baptist Church, a historically Black church in Alexandria, Old Dominion University in Norfolk, and former Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen in Alexandria.**
- The DOJ describes swatting as a “harassment tactic that involves deceiving dispatchers into believing that a person or persons are in imminent danger of death or bodily harm and causing the dispatchers to send police and emergency services to an unwitting third party’s address.” Denton also allegedly “**chose at least two other targets to ‘swat,’ including the New York City office of ProPublica and an investigative journalist at ProPublica** who reported on AWD and “publish[ed] [Denton’s] true identity.” Denton “unknowingly met with an undercover law enforcement officer” during federal and local law enforcement investigations, admitting his role in the swatting conspiracy. He faces a maximum of five years in prison.
- According to court documents described in a DOJ press release, **from November 2018 to approximately April 2019, Denton, John William Kirby Kelley (19) of Vienna, Virginia, and others “allegedly conspired together to conduct ‘swatting’ calls.”** Reporting in the *Washington Post* also describes **Pulitzer Prize-winning newspaper columnist Leonard G. Pitts Jr., who is African American, as a swatting victim** of the same Google voice number used by Denton and Kelley

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION (AWD)

against their targets in Virginia and New York. Kelley was arrested in January 2020 and **charged with making 134 fake calls to law enforcement.**

- In March 2020, *Politico* reported that the U.S. State Department was considering designating a white supremacist group as a Foreign Terrorist Organization (FTO). **While some analysts speculated that AWD would be “the top candidate,” the State Department ultimately designated the Russian Imperial Movement and three of its leaders** as Specially Designated Global Terrorists (SDGTs). Following *Politico*’s reporting, **AWD advisor Mason released an audio message declaring that AWD is disbanding as an organization, and acknowledged the federal pressure on AWD.**
- **AWD members are associated with sexual exploitation and sexual violence.** In March 2020, federal prosecutors alleged that **Denton, who went by the name “Rape” on an online AWD forum, was “involved in sharing child pornography.”** In February 2019, the **FBI arrested alleged AWD member Benjamin Bogard (20) for child pornography** when “federal agents became worried [Bogard] was ‘mobilizing to violence.’” **AWD advisor Mason was arrested on child pornography charges in the 1990s.** AWD member and alleged murderer **Samuel Woodward advocated rape against women of color and expressed his support for the mass rape of Bosnian Muslim women by Serbian soldiers and paramilitary fighters during the Bosnian genocide.**
- While AWD is based in the United States, several groups claim to be international affiliates of the organization. In December 2018, **following threats of violence made against Prince Harry for marrying Meghan Markle, who is biracial, British authorities arrested three members of Sonnenkrieg Division, the UK arm of AWD, on suspicion of possessing material likely to be used to prepare or commit acts of terrorism and conspiracy to inspire racial and religious hatred.** Two were convicted on terrorism charges in the UK and a third remains under investigation. In February 2020, British authorities banned Sonnenkrieg Division, making membership a criminal offense.
- Daryl Johnson, a former Department of Homeland Security intelligence analyst who wrote the 2010 DHS report “Rightwing Extremism: Current Economic and Political Climate Fueling Resurgence in Radicalization and Recruitment,” which was subsequently retracted by DHS following outrage by Republicans, has claimed that **Islamophobia and U.S.-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan are one of the key ingredients in the rise of many groups like AWD.**