

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION

IMPACT: Atomwaffen Division (AWD) is an American neo-Nazi group that espouses virulent racism, homophobia, and antisemitism. 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.

- In October 2015, **Brandon Russell posted a thread about Atomwaffen Division (AWD) 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.”**
- **The founder of AWD, Russell has been a member of the Florida National Guard since January 2016.** Following a May 2017 double homicide of two of Russell's roommates by a third roommate, all of whom were AWD members, police discovered Nazi propaganda and bomb making materials at the residence. Russell confessed his involvement with AWD to police and was **arrested and eventually sentenced to five years in prison for “possession of an unregistered destructive device and improper storage of explosive materials.”**
- **Iron March users advocated genocide, spread resources and guides with instructions for committing mass violence, and engaged in homophobic, antisemitic, and racist hate speech. Members of at least nine different international neo-Nazi groups frequented the site,** including AWD, National Action, Nordic Resistance Movement, Golden Dawn, and Azov Battalion.
- **Azov Battalion is a Ukrainian militia that was formed in 2014 as a response to the conflict in Eastern Ukraine.** According to one expert in international terrorism, **Azov Battalion has provided military training to members of white supremacist organizations based in the United States.** 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.** All agree that **membership in AWD swelled after the deadly Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA.** According to reporting in *ProPublica*, **AWD has cells in 23 states, with the largest and most active in Texas, Virginia, and Washington state.**
- **AWD has a close relationship with James Mason, an American neo-Nazi in his late 60s.** A former member of the group claims that AWD members are **“basically his disciples.”** Christian Picciolini, a “peace advocate” and “former violent extremist,” calls Mason the **“ideological godfather”** of the AWD. **AWD members frequently visit Mason at his apartment in Denver, CO. Mason has said that his goal is “to help [AWD] in any way I can.** Whatever they need, whatever I think is valuable, I give it to them.”
- **The strategy advocated by Mason and AWD is “accelerationism,” a fringe, leftist political idea that white supremacists have re-interpreted to advocate random violence in order to hasten the collapse of society and allow for the rise of fascism.** Accelerationism as understood by white supremacists shares some ideological similarities with far-right interpretations of anarchism. Developed in Europe and spread around the world in the 19th century, anarchism is classically understood as a “cluster of doctrines and attitudes centred on the belief that government is both harmful and unnecessary.”
- AWD and other white supremacist groups such as The Base and Fascist Forge, as well as the Christchurch/Ōtautahi shooter, have subscribed to accelerationism. **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.”** Mason's book, *Siege*, is required reading for all AWD members and functions as their “bible” and “handbook on how to operate.”
- In 2017 and 2018, members of AWD organized a series of “Hate Camps.” **At these meetings, members engaged in weapons training, hand-to-hand combat practice, and filmed propaganda footage. This training was intended to prepare members for guerrilla insurgency and a “race war.”**

ATOMWAFFEN DIVISION

- **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. **Vasilios Pistolis, a member of the Marines, was court martialled and expelled from the military in 2018 after his involvement with AWD came to light.** A *Frontline* and *ProPublica* investigation identified him as a participant in the 2017 Unite the Right rally in Charlottesville, VA. This same investigation identified posts in private AWD chats in which **Pistolis brags about assaulting protestors at the rally. Brandon Russell, the founder of AWD, has been a member of the Florida National Guard since January 2016.**
- **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 poster 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 December 2017, Nicolas Giampa murdered his ex-girlfriend’s parents after they discovered his far-right 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 murdered his former high school classmate Blaze Bernstein, who was gay and Jewish.** Shortly after Woodward was arrested, AWD members online began lauding him as a “one man gay Jew wrecking crew.” They also made t-shirts of him 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 May 2017, AWD member Devon Arthurs murdered his roommates and fellow AWD members Andrew Oneschuk and Jeremy Himmelman.** Arthurs reportedly had converted to Islam and sworn allegiance to ISIS, and was offended by Oneschuk and Himmelman making fun of his conversion. Investigators discovered that **their apartment was filled with Nazi paraphernalia, propaganda, weapons, and bomb making materials.** Their other roommate, AWD founder Brandon Russell, was arrested two days later and eventually 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.”**
- **Another alleged member of AWD, Benjamin Bogard, was convicted in 2019 of possessing child pornography** and sentenced to six years in prison. Bogard originally came to the attention of law enforcement due to the content of his social media accounts, which included threats of mass violence.
- While AWD is based in the United States, **several groups claim to be international affiliates of the organization.** Following threats of violence made against Prince Harry for marrying Meghan Markle, who is biracial, **British authorities in December 2018 arrested three members of Sonnenkrieg, 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.
- 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, **claims that Islamophobia is one of the key ingredients in the rise of many groups like AWD:** “The wars that have gone on in Afghanistan and Iraq, we had the rise of Islamophobia. That’s a huge factor in both the antigovernment groups and the militias that rally with firearms outside of mosques, but also the white supremacist groups that hate people of other nations and other skin colors.”