Dissertation Prospectus
The Church of Annihilation: Scripture, Saints, and Sacred Violence in Online Neofascism

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1 Dissertation Overview

When the perpetrator of the Annunciation Catholic Church shooting opened fire on a crowd assembled for mass in August 2025, he wielded a gun with extreme and online-influenced slogans scrawled across it in white paint. Later, law enforcement revealed that he had created a manifesto of sorts, composed of a journal with writings transliterated into Cyrillic characters, and had filmed himself with his guns and journal in two YouTube videos posted before the attack. Despite espousing antisemitic and anti-Catholic messages on his guns and throughout the videos, he appeared difficult to categorize cleanly into a conventional ideological framework. Much of the post-attack analysis assumed that the attack was yet another example of a "mixed, unstable, or unclear" ideological act.

The Anunciation Catholic Church shooting occurred six years after a different gunman opened fire on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand. Brenton Tarrant became one of the first extreme-right attackers to livestream his attack online, initiating a wave of similar violent livestreams in the years following. Tarrant carefully chose the aesthetic and tactical characteristics of his attack: He attached a GoPro to a Kevlar helmet, he painted neo-Nazi and online meme symbols written in white on his assault rifle, and even entire sections of manifestos copied without revision. Meanwhile, apocalyptic neo-Nazi groups throughout the world have adopted similar names, propaganda, and recruitment strategies, even while separated by geography and time.

Many of these militant groups have organized themselves explicitly in line with shared "cultures", such as "Siegism", a type of revolutionary fascism built on the writings of ideologue James Mason.

Described by observers as the "templatization" of mass casualty political violence, this pattern has developed within and across leaderless online communities like 4chan, Telegram, and Gab. The perpetrators of this wave of extreme-right, apocalyptic violence are seemingly diffused throughout the world and often know few, if any, fellow believers in offline contexts. Attack planning is often done independently, with support and guidance only coming from online communities. The proscription of specific groups like Terrorgram and the Atomwaffen-type groups and increasing law enforcement pressure on associated cybercrime networks have not managed to disrupt ongoing apocalyptic-oriented violence. As time has gone on, the online platforms at the heart of these attacks have remained largely in place, but the trappings of more conventional ideologies have fallen away. Participants in attacker fandoms (often referred to as Columbiners), the so-called "True Crime Community", and groups oriented around graphic violence, cybercrime, and other social transgressions have themselves begun exhibiting convergence to this template of political violence.

These trends seem on their face incompatible with our expectations of how violent mobilization occurs and movements are built. Conventional understandings of both social movements and terrorism suggest that cohesion, organizational unity, and well-defined systems of resource mobilization are important–if not necessary–to achieve movement goals. Even in more recent studies that acknowledge the ongoing trend of transnationalization and decentralization, such as terrorism studies literature on transnational jihadism, some type of centralized infrastructure is viewed as important for movement survival and goal coordination.

This overarching ecosystem exhibits a level of strategic convergence and aesthetic unity that would seem to belie its fluidity, ephemerality, and organizational disunity. Given the physical dispersion and even isolation, the organizational fragmentation, and the demographic breadth, from where does this mobilizing capacity emerge? What drives the contagion of the *form* and *intended function* of apocalyptic violence? Is it possible to empirically describe the latent relational infrastructure of a movement as decentralized as this?

This dissertation seeks to answer these research questions, which have profound implications for our understanding of political violence, contentious

politics, and the role of ideology in violent mobilization. I propose that this *community of apocalyptic violence* has developed a shared political and metaphysical identity due to the interactions of instances of political violence with the influence of online systems. Presenting both qualitative and quantitative evidence, I argue that the online and offline components of this community work in tandem to build a political and religious infrastructure, resulting in shared rituals, eschatology, canonization process, and holy texts.

By characterizing this ecosystem of violence as a form of decentralized political religion enabled by the particular characteristics of online platforms, this dissertation provides analytical power to both scholars and policymakers. It shifts the focus from individual perpetrators of attacks and individual websites to the relationships between fluid, highly dynamic, cross-platform and cross-national cliques and subgroups. It further establishes an empirical understanding of the rituals and symbols that this ecosystem generates, allowing for a clear description of it *despite* its fluidity and dynamism. Finally, it deploys a suite of mixed-methods tools selected for their applicability to studying social processes and decentralized communities.

Substantively, this dissertation builds on many scholarly traditions, including political behavior, psychology, religion, and movements from political science; extremism, fascism, political violence, and cult studies; and human-computer interaction and computer science. Methodologically, it leverages new scholarship in natural language processing, time-series analysis, and social network analysis and applies these methods to large-scale and highly granular social media data, alongside in-depth qualitative and digital ethnographic research of online communities.

This dissertation aims to answer the guiding research questions in five parts:

1. **A Theory of Religious Dynamics in Online Communities of Apocalyptic Violence.** A theory-building chapter bringing together literatures from political science, social psychology, extremism studies, and human-computer interaction.

2. **The Genesis of a Holy Text: The Cult of James Mason's *Siege*.** Using interrupted time-series and network contagion analysis, this chapter shows how Iron March re-publishing *Siege* drove the development of Siegism as a dominant cultural force in the community.

3. **Swarm Eschatology: How Offline Violence Drives Apocalyptic**

Rhetoric On 4chan. A causal inference approach to understanding how offline violence influences the development of apocalypticism and end-times theology on 4chan.

4. **"Canonization" of Violent Attackers in the Extreme-Right Apocalyptic Movement.** Introducing a novel dataset of every attempted or successful mass-casualty attack in OECD countries over the past 20 years, this chapter develops a measure of "Sainthood", or the level to which an attacker is heroized by the online extreme right, and analyzes which characteristics of an attack contribute to the level of Sainthood.

5. A conclusion to describe the implications of these studies and to establish an agenda for future work.

2 Chapter 1: A Theory of Apocalyptic Violence as Political Religion

In the first chapter, I integrate findings from the literatures of political violence, contentious politics, and social computing to understand the conventional expectations of movements and mobilization and to identify where contemporary studies may hint at more complex dynamics. I also use digital archival materials to qualitatively build a theory of how collective mobilization occurs among the online extreme right and identify testable testable implications of this theory. I propose that online extreme right collectives produce violent attacks when they establish social processes such as the widespread adoption of apocalypticism, the crystallization of mobilizing artifacts (like texts), and the establishment of a "canon" of movement heroes.

Despite the lack of dedicated congregations, ministers, or churches, the online community of apocalyptic violence exhibits a collective religiosity. Members of this movement share a set of rituals–including liturgy, sacrament, and other forms of worship–and take part in efforts to transform and define those rituals over time. Movement participants christen artifacts, including texts like books and manifestos, as effectively (and sometimes literally) holy. They further entrench consumption and interpretation of them in collective processes like recruitment, proselytization, and strengthening the intramovement bonds between disparate parts.

This theory proposes that apocalyptic violence originating from this online ecosystem is *contagious* and *systemic*, resulting from and contributing to both a broader sociopolitical infrastructure and a set of proximate feedback loops. These have driven the movement toward convergence on a "playbook" of violence, encompassing aesthetics, tactics, and goals, even while connections to conventional ideologies have been deprioritized. As a result, my theory builds on existing theoretical frameworks, including social contagion, collective memory formation, political religiosity, and contentious politics.

As illustrated in Figure 1, this theory involves three entities and four social processes. Each empirical chapter of this dissertation corresponds to one of the units: The movement's holy texts; the apocalypse as a mobilizing concept; and the so-called "Saints" that are worshiped as martyrs and heroes. These entities interact with one another through social processes. First, the movement anoints and builds a collective understanding of its holy texts through decentralized exegesis. This shared interpretation then drives the establishment of the movement's eschatology, enabling participants to define the contours of their end times. This apocalypticism then serves as a mobilizing force for would-be attackers, both directly and through the community-scale process of canonization. Finally, through ongoing and long-term veneration of attackers who achieve Sainthood, the community reasserts and expands their set of holy texts to embrace artifacts like manifestos produced by the attackers themselves.

This theory produces testable implications at each step in the feedback loop. My theory first proposes that this movement generates holy texts through decentralized participation in *exegesis*, or the critical interpretation of said text. The extremism studies community has long identified the primacy of certain texts to movement dynamics; some have gone so far as to define ideology specifically as the collection of texts selected as canon by followers. In this dissertation, I argue that the anointment of a canonical text can occur through shared, generally leaderless activities geared toward engagement with that text. Additionally, more than any intrinsic character to the substance of the text, it is this process of engagement that defines the text as "holy" that establishes it as foundational and causes it to acquire powerful influence in a movement's evolution. Thus, a text that has a disproportionate effect on a movement should be one that a movement engages deeply with through activities like analytical discussions, criticism, and even efforts to republish or repackage it. In Chapter 2, I focus on the case of James Mason's *Siege* to show how such collective activities were so

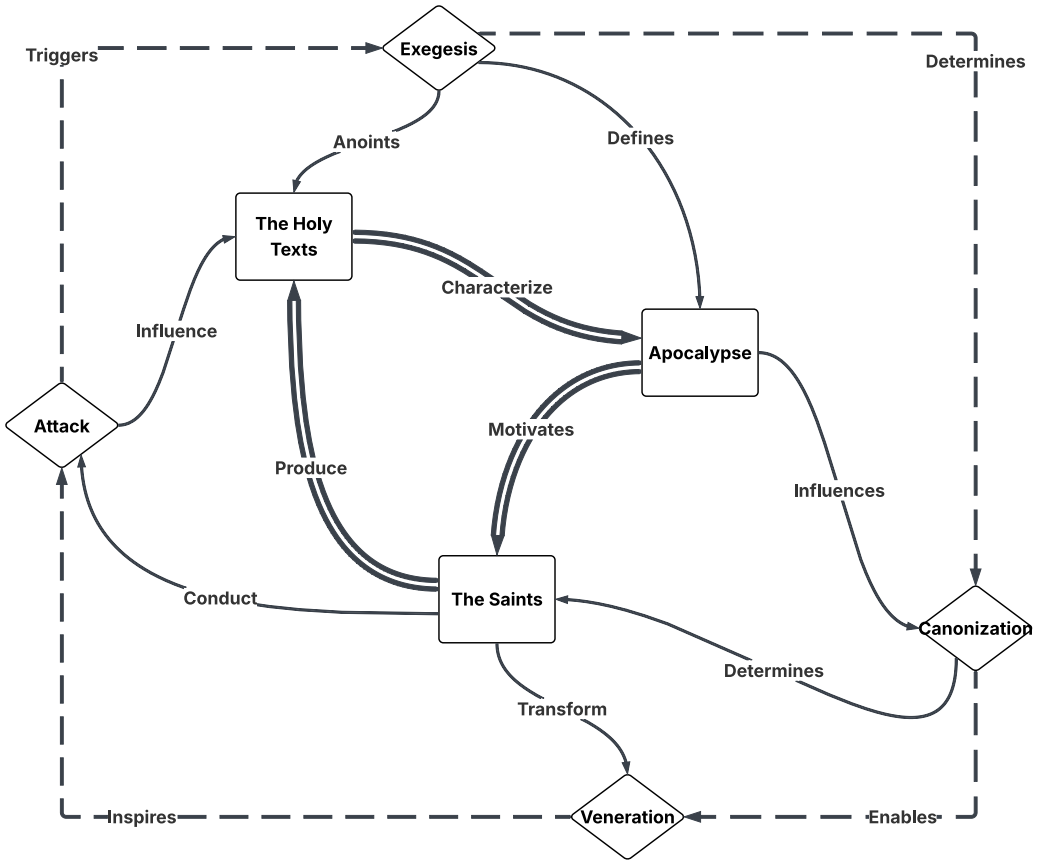

Figure 1: Process diagram of theory of decentralized religiosity in apocalyptic violence. Each empirical chapter will be focused on one of the central entities: Holy text, eschatology, and canon.

effective at anointing the book that they drove the development of so-called *Siege Culture*, to widespread and destructive results.

The establishment of a canonical text can transform a movement and influence the way it defines its goals, and for the movement I study here, this manifests as apocalypticism. While the global extreme right is by no means unique in its embrace of apocalyptic millenarianism, it promotes a form inspired by particular sources: Julius Evola and the Traditionalist School, Savitri Devi and Esoteric Hitlerism, and David Myatt and the Order of Nine Angles. While many members receive this influence indirectly, via their consumption of the canonical texts like *Siege*, these three fascist ideologues are responsible for much of the characteristics of apocalypticism that motivate violence from this movement. This apocalypticism identifies *actively facilitating the end-times* as the goal of violence, and it promotes small-cell and individual acts of terrorism and cruelty as instrumental in achieving that goal. I thus expect the movement community to *collectively process* violent attacks on the basis of their perceived contribution to the goal of apocalypse. In Chapter 3, I refer to the mechanism by which this foundation is repurposed for processing specific attacks as "swarm eschatology": the decentralized, community-wide participation in evaluating violence for its work in accelerating the world toward apoocalypse.

Under this theory, swarm eschatology utilizes some set of criteria for judging the contributions of particular attacks to the movement's goals. As this movement is generally leaderless and ideologues tend to be relatively ephemeral, the criteria themselves are created communally. Judging new attacks, revisiting past attacks, and determining who to lionize and mythologize make up the core components of *canonization*, the social process by which attackers may acquire the distinction of Sainthood. The particulars of canonization are fluid, and the clarity with which new Saints are anointed is expected to increase over the course of this movement's history. I further expect attack severity, target selection (e.g. "random" civilian targets vs. ideologically chosen ones), and artifact production (e.g. manifestos, livestreams, etc.) to be strongly influential in the canonization process. Together, the implications from this theory suggest that the movement converges on an "apocalyptic violence playbook" over time, and that the elements of that playbook drive the characteristics of future attacks. In Chapter 4, I put this to the test by empirically measuring "Sainthood" of attackers and modeling how different choices by attackers influence the canonization process on 4chan.

3 Chapter 2: The Genesis of a Holy Text: The Cult of James Mason's *Siege*

This chapter investigates the crystallization of ideology and culture on Iron March, a neo-fascist web forum active between 2011-2017. Building on literatures from social psychology, information science, and political science, I investigate how members participated in collective efforts to situation the forum in a legacy of past neo-fascist ideologues. I theorize that Iron March developed a cohesive and sustainable collective identity through its establishment of a "memory artifact" in the form of a forum-published edition of James Mason's Siege. I use this case to argue that such efforts can help explain how such communities can contribute to offline mobilization despite no formal organizational hierarchy, a fluid and transient membership, and geographic dispersion. I argue that the adoption of Siege was foundational to Iron March's capacity to produce anti-democratic militancy, including revolutionary fascist paramilitary groups and terrorist collectives.

3.1 Summary

Prior to 2015, neo-Nazi ideologue James Mason had largely been ignored by far-right movements globally since the height of his writing productivity in the 1980s and 1990s. Mason's writings had not acquired much influence in shaping far-right mobilization and organization, and he was studied by social scientists more as a synthesizer of the far-right milieu than as a producer of ideology and movement politics himself (Johnson and Feldman 2023). In one of the few pre-2015 studies of *Siege*, for instance, Goodrick-Clarke 2001 argues that Mason should be understood as a reflection of the intersecting thought of Charles Manson, Ku Klux Klan leader Louis Beam, and other ideologues.

Mason was arrested and charged with sexual eploitation of a minor in 1993, which resulted in a plea deal and three years of incarceration. He was released in 1999, after which he lived on little income and government support (Sunshine 2024). Mason's writings were occasionally discussed in extreme right-wing circles during the 2000s and early 2010s, but offline action, including violence, was more frequently attributed to texts like *The Turner Diaries* by William Luther Pierce.

On June 3, 2015, however, Iron March user Zeiger started a forum thread

in which he announced that he had edited and revised *Siege*. "I've re-edited the whole book to a clean and fresh look, with standard page size, corrected spelling and punctuation errors and clean formatting, Zeiger, a member of the Black Corps, wrote as an introduction to this project. "This is a huge step up from the garbage Solar-general edition,[1] and the paper copies go for 150$ these days.... Every Ironmarch poster should read this book." Zeiger included a PDF version and later updated the forum thread with an EPUB version, to enable compatibility with as many devices as possible.

This newly updated edition of *Siege* is branded with a title page declaring, "An ironmarch.org publication", and its cover is a photograph from the Euromaidan protests in Ukraine in 2014. It includes a preface and introduction from the second edition (published in 2003); the introduction, written by Nazi publisher Ryan Schuster, asserts that Mason's writings are "so subsersive and violent" that other far-right extremists have been turned off of it (Mason 2015). This introduction aims to canonize Mason as a crucial figure in the legacy of neo-fascism, comparing him to Louis-Ferdinand Céline, whose antisemitic polemic *Les Beaux Draps* was banned in Vichy France for its criticisms of the French military (Maftei 2011).

Evidence suggests that right around this moment in 2015, the Iron March community began embracing *Siege* as required reading for aspiring neo-fascists. As shown in Figure 2, mentions of *Siege* in the forums increased significantly beginning in mid-2015 and accelerated through the end of Iron March's lifespan. This effort to canonize Mason as a near-prophetic figure in revolutionary neo-fascism gained particular momentum in 2017, when Zeiger's third edition was updated with a new preface from Mason himself:

> Adolf Hitler, our greatest champion - as Rockwell would state - in two thousand years, declared in the course of his final radio broadcast to the German people - as well as to all the people of the White world - on January 30th, 1945, that with the victory of National Socialists over Bolshevism in Germany in 1933, the battle had been won and could not be reversed. Hard to believe then, hard to believe in 1967 or 1980. Maybe not so hard to believe today (Mason 2017).

This new quote from Mason serves a dual purpose. First, Mason establishes a connection to a genealogy of revolutionary fascism stretching from

[1] This was one of the only versions of *Siege* available at the time.

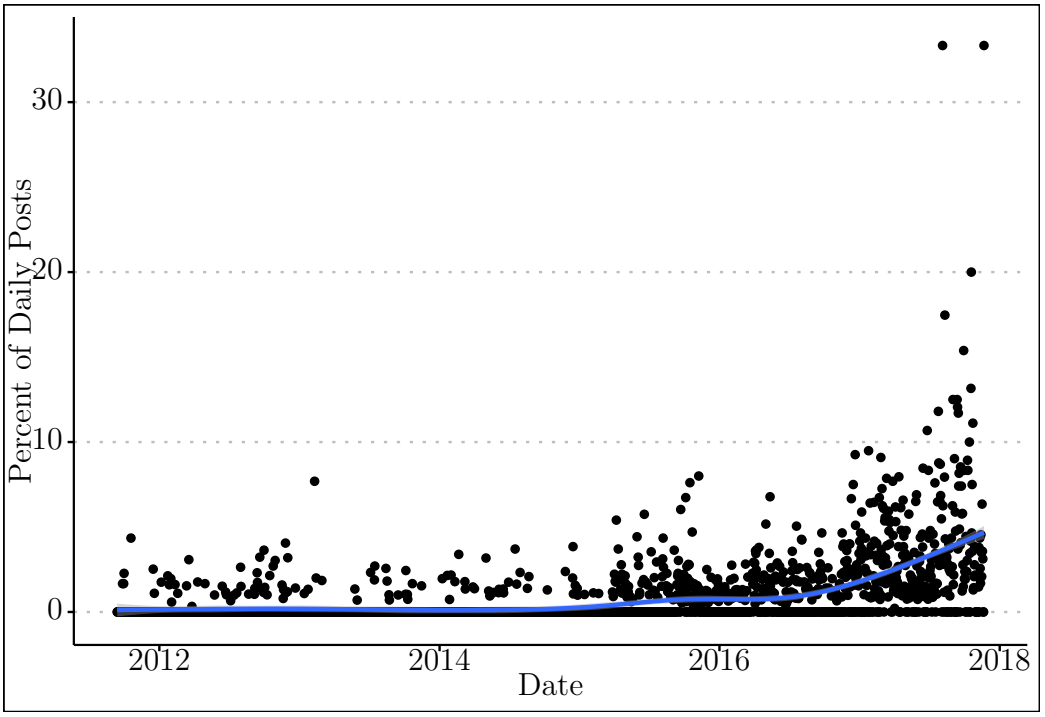

Figure 2: Percent of forum posts on Iron March mentioning *Siege* over time, smoothed with lowess.

himself to American Nazi Party leader George Lincoln Rockwell and originating with Adolf Hitler, "[white fascists'] greatest champion in two thousand years". Second, Mason suggests that the contemporary efforts in neo-fascist activism, specifically including Iron March, are the heirs of the Nazis who had won "the battle" for white power.

This resurrection effort had a profound impact on how the Iron March network mobilized in the ensuing years, extending beyond the scope of Iron March itself. Empirical evidence suggests that the publication of the Iron March edition of *Siege* was likely a turning point in the network's development. In Figure 3, I depict the results of a simplified interrupted time-series analysis on the frequency of mentions of Siege in the Iron March forums. Using weekly data, I treat the publication of the third edition of the book by Zeiger as the "intervention", including both an intervention dummy variable and a running sum of weeks since intervention as independent variables. The green line depicts the predicted values from the intervention model and the red line depicts the counterfactual forecast of the book not being published. I find evidence that a clear, long-term increase in mentions of *Siege* can be at least partially attributed to the Iron March edition's publication, when compared to a counterfactual forecast.

Qualitatively, Iron March's projects increasingly used the "Siege" name and promoted their connections to Mason himself. In 2017, Iron March users launched an effort called "Siege Culture" which aimed to wrap a set of tactics and strategies in a unified aesthetic style. This involved the creation of two new affiliated websites–siegeculture.com and siegeculture.wordpress.com–the publication of numerous blog posts and essays, and a leveraging of memory artifacts for marketing and recruitment purposes.

For instance, Iron March users adopted the name and style of "Universal Order", a short-lived group formed in 1982 by Mason with explicit inspiration from Charles Manson. This name outlived Iron March itself and became used throughout the revolutionary neo-fascist ecosystem, including by militant groups with connections to the Iron March network. Atomwaffen Division (transnational, founded in the U.S.), Feuerkrieg Division (transnational, founded in Estonia), Sonnenkrieg (U.K., spinoff of National Action), and The Base (transnational, founded in the U.S.) all explicitly tied themselves to Universal Order and Siege Culture between 2018-2020, after Iron March had been closed (Newhouse 2021; Lee and Knott 2022).

Iron March users thus constructed a memory of James Mason and *Siege* as the bridge between the knights of past fascist movements and Iron March's

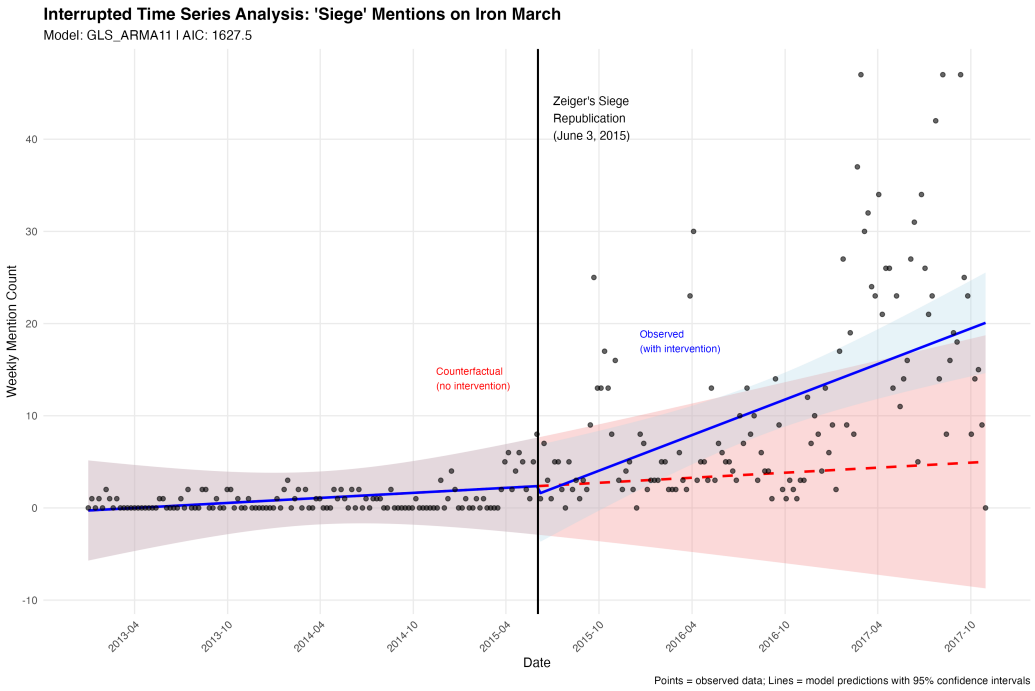

Figure 3: Interrupted Time-Series analysis of the impact of the Iron March version of *Siege* on mentions of the book in the forums

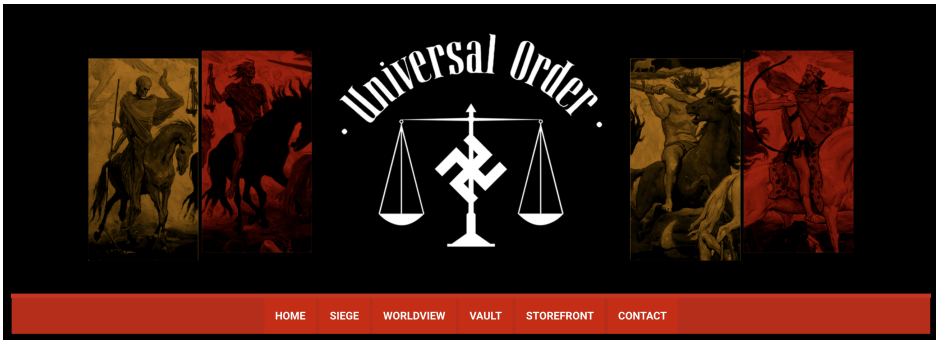

Figure 4: Banner image from SiegeCulture.com in 2017.

efforts to build a contemporary neo-fascist "fraternity". Zeiger, Alexander Slavros, and the "Siegist" militant groups relied on this collective memory to mobilize. This effort provided a common narrative of both the past and the future that helped unify the geographically and ideologically disparate membership. The evidence presented in this section suggests that republishing *Siege* and bringing Mason into the fold helped set off the explosion of online and offline activity that characterized Iron March's later years.

3.2 Methods

As shown in the summary section, part of this study will focus on running an interrupted time-series model to demonstrate how the collective activity of republishing *Siege* with "Iron March Edition" branding kickstarted the development of "Siege Culture" more broadly. The interrupted time-series analysis is designed to test the hypothesis that the primacy of *Siege* among the extreme right was driven by a discrete and collective effort to interpret and repackage the book. In other words, *Siege* became a holy text *because of* the shared process of resurrecting it in 2015.

This study will further test *Siege*'s adoption as a holy artifact of the movement by conducting a network contagion analysis of "Siegism", defined as expressions of adoration, inspiration, and reverence for *Siege* and its author. This analysis will test my central hypotheses across multiple different levels of relationships, including private one-to-one communication in direct messages and "public" many-to-many communication in forum posts. I will use all individual and community data available to me, including membership indicators like join date and activity level, post indicators like engagement metrics, and the content of posts and messages. Figure 5 shows results from a preliminary survival analysis indicating that users with greater influence in the Iron March network (as measured via degree centrality) are much quicker to adopt Siegist rhetoric, demonstrating one avenue through which Siegism likely spread.

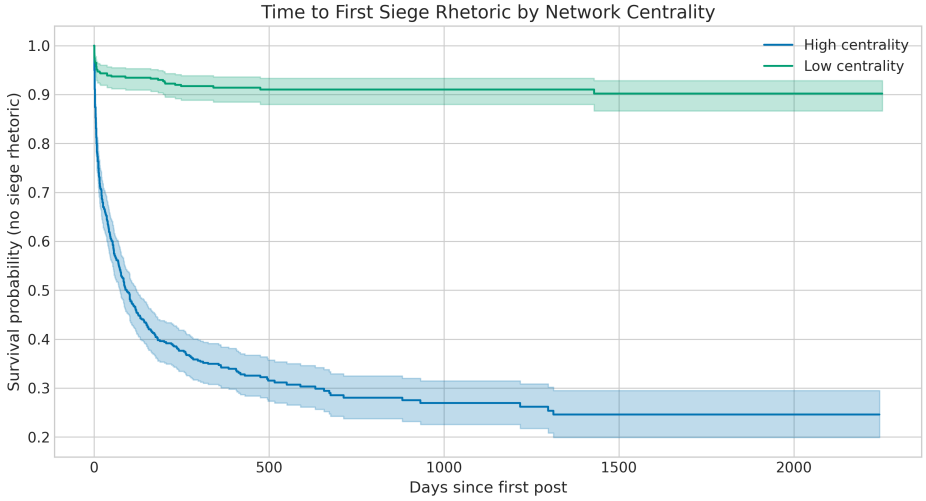

Figure 5: Survival analysis of Siege rhetoric adoption rates, low- vs. high-centrality Iron March users.

4 Chapter 3: Swarm Eschatology: How Offline Violence Drives Apocalyptic Rhetoric On 4chan

4chan's Politically Incorrect image board has become a hotspot for far-right extremism, and it has been linked to numerous hate crimes, physical violence, and acts of mass-casualty terrorism. 4chan symbols have even been prominently displayed at far-right protests, including at the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. Despite its increasing influence on far-right violence globally, the mechanics of radicalization and mobilization on /pol/ are still largely unexplored. In this chapter, I contribute to the study of political violence by investigating the relationship between offline attacks and online communities of extreme actors. Specifically, I explore how apocalypticism on /pol/ responds to real-world acts of mass casualty violence. I identify apocalyptic rhetoric across a subset of /pol/ posts by applying a transformer-based language classifier to the image board's archives. I then conduct an intervention analysis on the resulting time series to test the impact of mass attacks on rhetoric. I show that online apocalypticism significantly increases in the immediate aftermath of mass-casualty terrorist attacks. I argue that these

results contributes additional evidence for the existence of feedback loops between online communities and violent attacks.

5 Chapter 4: "Canonization" of Violent Attackers in the Extreme-Right Apocalyptic Movement

In this chapter, I argue that symbolic and tactical contagion in decentralized social movements is facilitated through a cyclical process of collective commemoration and canonization. I investigate how the online extreme right has developed multimedia processes which iteratively build a legacy of movement heroes. Beginning with the observation that these communities have come to refer to their heroes as "Saints", I develop a measure to describe the extent to which these communities "canonize" particular attackers. To create this measure, I apply a set of natural language processing techniques to a large-scale archive of eleven years of posts from 4chan's infamous /pol/ board. I then leverage this measure as a dependent variable in a regression against a novel dataset of acts of mass violence, investigating which characteristics of attacks and their perpetrators drive the canonization process. I expect to quantitatively show that attacks that are more severe and more explicitly connected to the extreme-right apocalyptic movement become canonized at higher rates. I also expect that attackers that adopt the tactics and aesthetics of past "Saints" are more likely to become Saints themselves than those who do not.

To deal with potential issues of selection bias, I will also build a custom dataset of the past 20 years of attempted and successful mass casualty violence (drawing from various extant sources like ACLED, START's Global Terrorism Database, the RTV dataset, etc.). I will limit this scope to OECD countries.

I will also create associated fields to track the characteristics of these events. A subset of this data and examples for each field are shown in Table 1.

I intend to use 4chan data to establish a measure of "Sainthood" that is designed to identify the durability and strength of this commemoration process. I will design this measure to incorporate language metrics of *volume*, *orientation*, and *coherence*. I aim to create a flexible measure applicable

Variable	Description	Example
Location	Specific geographic areas where attack took place	Christchurch, New Zealand; Al-Noor Mosque; Linwood Mosque
Fatalities	Total deaths directly attributable to attack (inclusive of suicide)	51
Total Casualties	Total injuries and deaths directly attributable to attack	140
Aesthetics	Specific style, language, symbolic, and other characteristics of the attack	Written symbols and slogans on guns; body armor; symbols on body armor; playing songs while attack is carried out
Manifesto	Whether the attacker published a a manifesto, what it is called, and where it was originally posted	Yes; "The Great Replacement"; 4chan and 8kun
Target	Who or what the attacker wanted to target (and whether they were actually targeted)	Mosques and Muslim civilians in New Zealand
Ideology	Any ideological or political affiliations expressed by the attacker	White supremacist; apocalyptic; eco-fascist
Online connections	Specific communities that the attacker frequented before the attack	4chan

Table 1: Subset of variables to be included in the mass shooter database

to large-scale unstructured text data to better understand who are most consistently deemed heroes and who are rapidly forgotten. This measure of Sainthood will be used as my dependent variable in later analysis.

First, the Sainthood measure will incorporate elements designed to capture the intensity and durability of discussions of particular attackers. While I expect discussions to be most intense during and immediately after a mass shooting, one of the most important parts of Sainthood in these communities is the survival of discussions of particular attackers for months or years after the attack concludes. As such, this Sainthood measure will incorporate the proportions of /pol/ posts mentioning particular attackers for different time horizons (within the first 24 hours, first month, first year, etc.). Shorter time horizons capture immediate intensity, while longer ones capture durability. I will create these metrics by measuring the number of mentions of each attacker and dividing those by the total number of posts in a particular time period.

Second, I will generate a measure of community orientation toward particular attackers using sentiment analysis of the posts in the dataset. In particular, I will fine-tune *emotion detection* models based on the transformer architecture, which has been shown to most capably deal with the particular linguistic and orthographic characteristics of highly insular online communities like 4chan. I aim to identify the general emotional posture of /pol/ users toward attackers, measuring median levels of joy, anger, sadness, disappointment, etc. Positive emotions are assumed to indicate a stronger level of commemoration and Sainthood, while negative emotions suggest a higher likelihood of collective forgetting.

Finally, I will incorporate the linguistic coherence of discussions about particular shooters. I will calculate coherence by first converting each post to a language embedding extracted from Google's Gemini large language model. These embeddings are 764-dimensional representations of text that have been shown to capture highly granular information about semantic meaning, contextual word use, and even spelling variations. By finding the pairwise cosine similarity scores for the set of posts mentioning attackers for particular time periods, I can identify which attackers receive the most similar (and thus "coherent") discussions on /pol/. In other words, if there are 50 posts in a week about Brenton Tarrant, the median of the pairwise cosine similarity scores of those posts will provide a measure of linguistic convergence that can be compared across time periods and different attackers.

These three metrics will be incorporated into a single measure of "Saint-

hood" that will represent the direction, magnitude, and similarity of conversations about attackers. In equation form, this measure can be (loosely) represented by:

$$Sainthood = (Intensity + longevity + Median(Similarity)) * \frac{(Emotion_{positive})}{(Emotion_{negative})}$$

This chapter will also investigate *retroactive* canonization, which I define as the process of anointing as Saints attackers that predate 4chan. This analysis will be primarily qualitative, relying on deep review and investigation of Sainthood artifacts posted on 4chan (or adjacent platforms). I intend on compiling a collection of images, videos, and other pieces of content such as "Saints Calendars" that track anniversaries of violent events alongside attackers' birthdays and death days; remixes and supercuts of media about attacks; "scoreboards" tracking severity of violent events; and propaganda pieces utilizing imagery associated with particular events or attackers.

6 Chapter 5: Implications, Future Directions, and Conclusion

Studying social processes in violent online communities matters because we know that online behavior can motivate offline attacks, but the mechanics of online social processes in these spaces are still largely unknown. We know that the Christchurch shooter's choices are now mirrored in many recent attacks, but how and why was that shooter's legacy made salient? Why did the relatively unknown *Siege* become so important in the online extreme right? What causes these communities to embrace apocalyptic views?

In this chapter, I conclude this dissertation by arguing that the evidence presented here can help us answer each of these questions. I show how understanding collective processes and characterizing this ecosystem as exhibiting both political and religious infrastructure can significantly improve our understanding of political violence in online and leaderless contexts. I also propose that efforts to mitigate political violence should take into account these "background social conditions"–the communities from which violent attackers emerge, and which connect many attacks into a constantly growing web of violence.

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