YEAR OF THE RAT

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For Hattie

Introduction

The smell of the crowd hits us before the sound does, a chemical tang from the hand-held flares sparking up in central Warsaw. It tickles our throats and itches our eyes. As we get closer to Solidarności Avenue, the capital's main street, the yells of 100,000 Polish demonstrators charge around the corner to meet us: *Bóg! Honor! I Ojczyzna!* God! Honour! And Fatherland!

Six of us are here from the UK. This rally is nominally meant to celebrate Polish independence on 11 November, but has become an annual meet-up for the European far right. Groups from across the Continent come to forge connections, sell copies of *Mein Kampf*, stamp on LGBT rainbow flags, and get drunk. Clad in skull balaclavas, they march through the city waving banners emblazoned with neo-Nazi symbols and slogans like 'DEFEND WHITE EUROPA'. Hosted for the last decade by a fascist party called the National Radical Camp, it has become a significant date in the extremist calendar. It is controversial even within Poland – the mayor of Warsaw has tried in previous years to ban it. Journalists reporting on the event have been attacked with mace by participants.

We are delegates from Britain First, an extreme political party run by Paul Golding. At the march, he points his

camcorder at passing anti-abortion banners that depict bloody foetuses. 'This is how Britain should be,' Paul shouts over the noise. 'This is what a country without a left-wing ideology looks like – united and patriotic.'

The crowd moves east through the city, dodging firecrackers and plumes of red and white flare smoke. Ashlea and Alex, two other Britain First members, look around in wonder. The biggest rallies they have attended back home had a fraction of this turnout. They marvel at the discipline of the crowd – their own events in the UK are beset by drunkards carrying beer cans and urinating in public.

Nick, a senior figure in the party, puts an excited arm around my shoulders and pats my chest. I tense up, feeling like I have been plugged into a socket. Nick's hand – not that he knows it – is touching the hidden camera underneath my shirt. Will he ask why a weird plastic box is taped to my chest? Will he expose my hidden wire in the middle of a mob of neo-Nazis? But he doesn't seem to notice, and we march on through Warsaw, my heart racing. Later, over dinner in a five-star hotel with a Polish MEP, I am convinced my camera is visible and keep dashing to the toilet to check. But I'm safe – for now.

We go out to a bar adorned with white pride stickers to down shots of frozen vodka. I listen to them talk about how the Holocaust was 'the big lie', and Auschwitz – a four-hour drive away – didn't have gas chambers, but swimming pools and cinemas for Jews to enjoy. When two of the guys suggest a strip club, I head back to my hotel, up the road from the Jewish cemetery of Warsaw which is filled with the mass graves of ghetto victims. I lie on my bed with my hands on my face, smelling the booze and fag ash on

my fingers, thinking about how much longer I'll be able do this.

I was undercover in the British far right for more than a year, pretending to be a racist named Chris while feeding information back to my colleagues at HOPE not hate, an anti-fascist organisation. I put my normal life as a journalist on hold to spend time among racists. Britain First, who I was with in Poland, is one of the extreme groups I infiltrated. There was also a far-right community network, a white nationalist campaign, a neo-Nazi conference, a circle of Holocaust deniers, and a movement of race scientists, including one well-funded organisation financially backed by Silicon Valley.

Each of the groups had their own beliefs and attracted members for different reasons. Not one of them knew my real identity, although I repeatedly came close to being found out.

For a year, I was constantly frightened. It felt like there was an exclamation mark stamped onto my brain. Exposure was my biggest worry, and I imagined it happening in two ways. Either I would make a small but irreparable slip-up, like introducing myself as Harry instead of my fake name, Chris. Or I would be in a pub, wedged into a corner, when a friend from my normal life would approach shouting my real name and I would be unable to explain myself.

Before a meet-up, I thought about all the ways it could go wrong, obsessing over possible conversations and how to escape if the worst happened. An hour undercover required three or four to prepare. As a naturally nervous person, I found that my habit of mentally rehashing past conversations and planning future ones was helpful in preparing

for undercover meetings. I would rehearse dialogue and try to anticipate potentially difficult questions about who I was, or why I wanted to know something. Afterwards, I would be unable to sit still, my fingers palpitating with a five-espresso jitter. Having kept myself steady for so long, I would have a lot of nervous energy to release. Every night after a meet-up, I had nightmares about being exposed.

I put myself through this because I wanted to get close to the British far right, find out what kind of people join, and, if possible, do what I could to disrupt their operations. The far right now makes up around a third of terrorism convictions and a majority of referrals to the government's Prevent counter-radicalisation scheme. The threat of terrorist activity was frequently in the headlines during this time. A man firebombed an immigration centre in Dover. A white supremacist from the Midlands made firearms and explosives to kill ethnic minorities and was convicted on terrorism charges. Another man was charged with the attempted murder of an asylum seeker in Worcester. Understanding where these people come from, what they believe and how they organise has never been more important.

As I was writing this book in the summer of 2024, the biggest wave of far-right violence in the post-war period swept England. After a teenager born to Rwandan parents stabbed three young girls in an attack on a Taylor Swift-themed dance class in Southport, race riots exploded across twenty-seven English towns and cities. Far-right agitators, wrongly believing the perpetrator was Muslim, targeted mosques and Muslim neighbourhoods in the violence that followed, while arsonists set fire to hotels housing asylum

seekers and rioters set up whites-only roadblocks. Around eight hundred people have been charged in relation to the disorder.

A moment that sticks in my head from the riots was a mob in Hull ambushing a BMW. They jumped onto the car, yanked the door open and dragged out the driver and his two passengers. None of them were Muslim – the three men were Christians from Romania, who thought they were about to die as one rioter attacked them with a metal bar. They survived by escaping to a nearby hotel housing refugees.

Far-right activism takes many forms. There are sophisticated, educated and resourceful campaigners working towards ridding this country of anyone not considered white and British. I became close to well-connected, well-funded extremists who sought to widen the Overton Window – the range of ideas acceptable to the mainstream – to include race science and eugenics. Some of them enjoy the support of American tech tycoons and Conservative policymakers, work in the right-wing think-tank scene and, in one case, write policy papers for Downing Street.

All this matters. We cannot allow our democracy to become undermined by those who want to implement eugenicist policies or abuse and forcibly deport British citizens because they have a different religion or skin colour. Extreme organisations in the UK are looking to capitalise on the election of five MPs from the far-right Reform Party. They have furthermore been energised by the re-election in the US of Donald Trump. Italy now has a far-right prime minister, the first since the Second World War. In Holland the anti-Islam Freedom Party of Geert

Wilders won the most seats at the last election. At the time of writing the AfD is polling nationally at 23 per cent in Germany, a record high, and leading polls in three states. Britain First, a party I spent time with, is developing connections with Continental partners to learn electioneering and seek funding.

Getting close enough to the far right to understand it is difficult. Extremists on the fringes of society are rarely open to approaches from reporters, who are typically believed to be controlled by dark establishment forces. Just as Oswald Mosley, the most famous icon of the British far right, denied the extent of his extreme activity (notably his relationship to Nazi Germany), today's organisations also believe the path to success depends on hoodwinking the public with lies of their moderation. Far-right activists will try to deceive the media to seek a favourable write-up on the occasions where they do speak to them. Undercover, however, they will tell you things they never otherwise would. They reveal their true views and intentions, and not the ones they think you want to hear.

I had found this out while experimenting with undercover reporting for my blog, Scout. Inventing a false name, I got in touch with conspiracy theorists and far-right activists, asking to join. I spent Sunday Mass at a renegade church of antisemitic Catholics in Southport, an afternoon in Birmingham at the house of an anti-satanic activist, and a day among the sleepy members attending UKIP's annual conference in Skegness. I became fascinated by the idea that in every town there is a community of conspiracy theorists whose beliefs are completely unrecognisable to the mainstream.

These reporting trips usually had a narrow journalistic objective: hear the racist comments and get out safely. I never stayed long enough to find out what the people in these movements are really like. Why do they join? What do they want? Do they get along with each other? Do they find it fulfilling? What do they tell their partners, parents and kids about their activities? What do they talk about when they're not being racist? Why do they give up Saturday after Saturday to hand out scaremongering leaflets or picket refugee accommodation and get insulted by passers-by? Why do they listen to the leaders in these movements, who to outsiders seem pretty obviously to be money-hungry grifters or aggressive cranks? How does a leader maintain power and momentum?

A long-term infiltration project in which I tried to get close to the most extreme, sinister groups in the British far right would, I thought, be the best way to answer these questions. It would also be a useful way to learn about their capacity to organise events, draw funding and forge international connections. The thrill of working undercover was a draw, but I also had a personal stake in this. I am not spiritually or culturally Jewish, but I come from a Jewish family – one side fled the Nazi invasion of France; the other emigrated from the Russian Pale of Settlement that restricted how Jews could live and work. I am fascinated and maddened by the persistence of antisemitic prejudice, and the adaptation of old tropes that targeted them also being used against Muslims.

While researching stories for my website, I would consult with HOPE not hate, which in addition to monitoring the far right runs infiltrators into extremist groups

to disrupt their operations. In 2017, their mole inside a far-right terror group foiled a plot to murder a Labour MP. Another helped to identify the 1999 nail bomber who detonated explosives in areas of the capital known for their Bangladeshi, black and gay populations.

HOPE not hate's reports on the far right always displayed an encyclopedic knowledge of extremist campaigners and their activities. I contacted their research team in late 2022 to discuss working together. We couldn't meet at their office because, as the targets of death threats and harassment campaigns, their location is kept secret. Instead, they invited me to a gloomy central London pub, where I met David Lawrence, Patrik Hermansson and Joe Mulhall.

Over a pint of Guinness, Joe, the head of the research team and a veteran anti-fascist, asked what I was hoping to hear. Would I like to team up for a long-term infiltration project? It would be more intense, but with any luck much more revealing than the day trips I had so far been doing. An undercover project in which I joined and became close to the leaders of a far-right group could, Joe explained, meaningfully disrupt their operation. He told me to think carefully if this was what I really wanted, given the dangers involved. I didn't have to think long. I was already spending time undercover in extremist circles. This was a chance to do it more safely, with more guidance. Far better, I thought, to work with the professionals than risk bumbling about on my own. I told Joe I'd let him know, but as I left the pub, I had already made up my mind.

Patrik Hermansson became my handler. He was a perfect choice. In 2016, he had pretended to be a master's student on exchange from Sweden in order to infiltrate extremist

think tanks. He was appointed to help with vetting for a far-right group. Over a year, Patrik befriended the Holocaust denier David Irving and captured on film for the first time the identity of the secretive white nationalist Greg Johnson. His last meeting was at the Charlottesville rally in 2017, where American neo-Nazis lit torches and chanted antisemitic slogans; one of them murdered the anti-fascist activist Heather Heyer by running her over in his car. Patrik saw it happen.

During our project, Patrik was patient, attentive and calm. He understood the difficulty of undercover work, having done it himself for so long. I quickly grew to like him and trust his advice. We brainstormed how to respond to messages and phone calls from my new far-right friends, and how to go safely in and out of meetings.

My first assignment was to infiltrate a far-right group he had identified. It was a community network set up by a disgraced academic booted out of the University of Surrey for peddling race hate. On his website, he advertised a cryptic link to meet-ups, and so Patrik and I began looking for a way in. The British far-right scene, he explained, is a giant Venn diagram, with a small number of activists belonging to more than one organisation. He suspected that we might encounter people in one group who could refer me to a more extreme one. We would take a year to see what we could find, and then stop. Any longer might risk my safety and sanity.

Together, we built my new identity, planning my debut in far-right society. First, we created Chris. Fake identities are easier to remember if they are anchored to the truth, so I inverted my biography to create an altered version of

myself. My parents and siblings now went by their middle names, for instance.

We wanted Chris to avoid too much attention, so we gave him a job that sounded so tedious people would be unlikely to ask a second or third question about it. Chris was a strategy consultant working in support function optimisation. Clearly we'd chosen well because the eyes of everyone I met glazed over at the mention of my job title and people rarely wanted to know anything more about it. To look the part, I chose the most boring clothes in my wardrobe, selecting a white shirt, a zip-up fleece, a pair of navy trousers, and a practical yet sad anorak, complemented with a fake lanyard around my neck.

In each of the groups I joined, being undercover tended to mean the same thing. I had to show up and fit in. That could mean participating in a conversation about the Jews controlling global politics, canvassing for votes with an extremist party, or doing the washing-up at a house full of Holocaust deniers. Patrik and I thought that Chris should be dependable, affable and, above all, normal.

Right-wing extremists tend to think that infiltrators will be easy to spot: slippery and sneaky, asking cackhandedly obvious questions like 'What does everyone think about the Jews?' or 'Committed any good hate crimes recently?' Among the far right, this is known as fed-posting, which is when heavy-handed police investigators appear in online groups and say especially racist things in order to prompt admissions of illegal activity. I wanted to avoid fed-posting, not just to keep my cover, but for ethical reasons – I didn't want to entrap anyone into saying something they wouldn't ordinarily discuss.

As Chris, I would sit there politely, buy rounds of drinks if it was my turn, and contribute to conversations. I couldn't pretend to be an Aryan *Übermensch*, coming, as I do, from a long line of short-sighted, short-statured dyspeptics. Patrik and I thought Chris should be an interested layman concerned about demographic replacement – the fear that white people will one day become a minority due to high immigration and low birth rates. When asked, I would mention growing up in an ethnically homogeneous village and feeling alienated upon moving to diverse London; how I enjoyed the videos of far-right content creators; how I was lonely and bored and didn't have anyone to talk to about my politics.

Patrik advised me not to speak too much. A lie becomes weaker the more details you try to pack in, he explained. Another piece of advice was often in my mind. A former colleague at *The Times* once told me that in undercover work, you can avoid suspicion by convincing people that you are a bit dim, a bit dopey. Fortunately, this has never been a problem for me.

Next to sort was the camera. This is much less cool than its Hollywood equivalent. In spy movies, there are glasses, lapel pins and even contact lenses that send a clear live feed back to an operations room. The real thing is clunky and frustrating. It's a plastic cube an inch in size, and can be screwed onto a shirt button, placed under your clothes where it rests on the sternum. This box has a cable that dangles down your chest and feeds into your trouser pocket through a hole made with scissors. The wire connects into a heavy battery the size of a cigarette packet, and there it rests, about as comfortably as a hernia.

I never got used to the camera. Its low position meant that footage was recorded at gremlin height, and I would try, when conversing with tall people, to lean backwards so I could capture their faces. The whole thing felt as conspicuous as a 'kick me' sign.

It was some consolation to know that in the past these devices were even more obvious. Undercover journalists used to rely on cameras that recorded footage onto cassette tapes which would emit a loud click at the end of the reel. Paul McMullen, a former *News of the World* reporter, once described hanging out in the back of a van with violent cocaine smugglers, unable to remember if he had put a 45-minute or a 90-minute tape in his device, panicking that it was about to make a strange noise. The equipment may have improved, but the fear remains that it will somehow malfunction and expose its user.

I learned the hard way to keep checking if a tape was working. On a day out with Britain First, I listened, with horror, to senior members telling me Auschwitz was 'made up'. Gas chambers weren't used except for delousing, they said. Here was proof that Britain First is a nasty party whose activists traffic in some of the vilest conspiracy theories – and I was capturing it on camera! At the first opportunity, I slipped into a pub toilet to check the recording equipment. I pulled it out of my pocket, pushed a button, and saw with soul-mangling despair that the camera had been off the whole time. Next time, I taped bits of plastic over the off button to make sure it couldn't be touched while in use. The snapped-off covers of dental floss boxes, I learned, fit perfectly.

My biggest worry at the beginning was maintaining

my cover. As Chris, I had to repeat the name in my mind whenever I was walking into a meeting in order to remind myself who I was pretending to be. It would be so easy, I knew, to slip up, so I made sure to pause whenever anyone held out their hand to shake, to think *Chris* before introducing myself. I was pleased that, before long, I would turn my head if I heard a shout of 'Chris!' although I was never able to stop myself from reacting if someone called out 'Harry!' On one occasion, when another Harry was part of the group I was with, I found myself automatically – helplessly – answering questions not meant for me. Thankfully, nobody noticed.

There were many near misses. Once at a Wetherspoons with a white nationalist influencer, I offered to buy a round on the pub's app. I pulled out my phone and in full view of the table, started typing in my real email address, getting halfway through before noticing. I quickly deleted the name, muttering that I sometimes borrowed my girlfriend's account, and got away with it.

The heartstopper came when I logged onto a video call with an American eugenicist on my personal email account. Five minutes in, I saw my real name on the screen. I hung up and waited until I could breathe normally again. I rejoined using my Chris account, my face burning, ready with a lie about how I had been using a borrowed work laptop. Luckily, my contact didn't remark on it, and she continued speaking.

Apparently when bigamists cross the threshold of their secret family's front door they forget about their other partner and children. Something similar happened to me. I noticed that after arriving for a meeting, once I had greeted

everyone and no longer had to mentally repeat my pseudonym, I was in Chris mode. Thoughts from real life intruded sometimes – *cancel Amazon Prime, get flea medicine for dog, what am I doing here?* – but so much of my focus went on pretending to be Chris that I could bat these away.

Chris mode was like a flow of concentration. It could last for hours but break unexpectedly. If someone looked at my chest, I became convinced they had spotted my hidden camera and I began catastrophising. Once, a far-right campaigner directed his gaze at my shirt. Straight into the camera lens. I was sitting in his house, with a dozen other activists, far from the door, with his eyes drilled at exactly where the device was. Had he seen it? I counted all the steps I would have to take, all the people I would need to pass – *his eyes were still on me!* – before I'd have to unhook the tricky latch on the back door and escape. Then he yawned and looked elsewhere. He had just been zoning out.

Going undercover is an extreme strategy, and readers may ask if it is justified. Activists and politicians on the far right are intensely distrustful of the media, and many of them believe it is controlled by malfeasant Jews. Had I walked into a meeting of a far-right group and openly presented myself as a journalist, there is no chance that I could have spent time with them and learned their inner workings. In the rare event that I would be allowed to interview them at all, I would have been presented with a more moderate front. The groups I infiltrated had vetting procedures and were obsessed with 'opsec' – operational security – like redirection points, secret handshakes and phone checks designed to keep reporters out.

Even those few on the far right who do interact with

journalists have devised tactics to mislead them. I met an American couple with connections to the far right who gleefully described their successful manipulation of the British press. To secure more favourable coverage, they downplayed objectionable beliefs in interviews and dropped progressive soundbites to protect themselves from accusations of bigotry. By mentioning their support for LGBT rights, or their disavowal for white nationalism, this American couple sought to garner positive write-ups and avoid accusations of belonging to the far right.

Far-right organisations seek to expand using disingenuous methods. Take Britain First. Its leader, Paul Golding, would have you think it has a patriotic manifesto, somewhere to the right of the Conservatives, honouring broken Tory promises to curb illegal immigration. What you don't see in the pamphlets and the social media posts is the reality of the organisation, which is vicious and racist. The party's head of security, when I became a member, had been convicted of slashing the throat of a policeman; their national organiser told me about how he thought the gas chambers at Auschwitz were hoaxes; their candidate for London mayor revealed his 'hatred for coons'.

Leaders in the far right conceal their true nature to present a more acceptable version to potential voters, donors and sometimes their own members. One prominent eugenicist who works in Westminster admitted this tactic after I'd befriended him. 'Everyone puts on the mask,' he said. Only by spending prolonged periods of time with them, winning their trust and being deemed safe is it possible to see those moments when that mask slips, and the truth peeks out from underneath. If the far right are

using subterfuge to gain ground in politics, then it makes sense to turn their tactics back on them. It takes a thief to catch a thief.

What follows is an account of the year in which I wore my own mask in the British far right. It is not a complete picture of radicalism in this country. I did not spend time with any Islamist groups, for example, or extremists of other stripes. Nor is it a complete picture of the far right. Safe infiltrations are done slowly, and I could only join so many groups in the time I had. Each upcoming chapter deals with a different group I joined, but the account is not chronological as my time with each organisation overlapped.

Far-right activity in the UK takes a number of forms. There are political parties contesting elections, hoping to build a supporter base that will take them to power. These range from large parties, like Reform UK, which has MPs in Parliament and millions of voters, to much smaller operations such as Britain First, which has no elected officials and an inner circle of just forty activists.

Some groups are dedicated to campaigning, on the street or online. A handful plan or in rare instances commit terrorist acts. Sometimes groups or the people within them will be involved in multiple forms of activism. Although I met people who had been convicted of crimes in the past and in some cases broken terrorism laws, I did not encounter anybody who was at the time planning a terror attack.

Of course, not all far-right campaigning in this country is coordinated by an organisation. In the days of the British Union of Fascists, members belonged to a regional branch, their subscriptions noted in a ledger. Today, a great deal of

far-right activity is called 'post-organisational'. This means that extremist influencers like Tommy Robinson – real name Stephen Yaxley-Lennon – can use their enormous audiences on social media to mobilise followers for anti-immigrant demonstrations or financially support them without the need for a traditional organisation. This limited what I could infiltrate.

There were also some groups too risky for me to join. There are a number of activists who hound asylum seekers landing in small boats at Dover. One of them is called Steve Laws, and I had written about him when he contested an election for UKIP. In response, he shared my name and photograph to his many thousands of online followers, warning them to watch out for me. I was always worried that I would bump into someone who had seen this alert. As Chris, I disguised myself as best I could by cutting my hair short and growing a moustache. It did very little to change my appearance.

This book is also incomplete in the sense that I didn't learn everything I would have liked to. I couldn't call up my new friends with the questions I really wanted to ask about their childhoods and family lives and hobbies. Sometimes I would detect a sensitivity threshold that I might have been able to cross as a nosy journalist, but not as a stranger among clandestine racists. There are only so many times you can ask 'Sorry, what was that you said about the Jews?' before it sounds odd.

While it might be ironic that I lied and cheated for a year, what follows is all true. The conversations described below are based on video recordings, audio tapes and notes I took. Halfway through the year undercover, the

film director Havana Marking began making a documentary about HOPE not hate, and recorded some of the briefing and debriefing sessions I had with Patrik. *Undercover: Exposing the Far Right* was broadcast on Channel 4 in October 2024. At the same time, the *Guardian* and HOPE not hate published reports about some of the material that we uncovered in the shady world of race science.

So what did we find? Contrary to the perception that the British far right is only composed of the kind of lagered-up, English Defence League skinheads you see on TV, I met people from all walks of life. In the first group I infiltrated, a far-right community called the Basketweavers, I saw that they came from all classes and educational backgrounds – I met aristocrats and the unemployed; people with PhDs and school dropouts (see Chapter 1). Some were happy just meeting up once or twice a week, while others wanted to travel overseas to far-right conferences and develop connections with foreign activists. This is how I ended up in Tallinn, Estonia (see Chapter 2). Curiously among groups dedicated to white nationalism, not all of them were white. I could only speculate about what made a half-Japanese man or an Indian Muslim, for instance, join a racist community devoted to ending race-mixing. I felt the same confusion when women arrived at these events. For every nine men, there was one woman – who inevitably had to listen to a discussion on the higher IQ of men and the unsuitability of women to intellectual life.

Not all of the groups I joined were that proficient at activism, and were just as interested in getting drunk as talking about demographics (see Chapter 3). In one case, I saw how a leader obsessed with power manipulated his

activists into volunteering their time, energy and, above all, money, in his service (see Chapter 4). Some activists have come down on the wrong side of the law, and after prison sentences, question their future in the movement (see Chapter 5).

I learned, as the year went on, that a great deal of what my new associates were discussing was not confined to fringe groups. Some leading activists were reaching the ears of powerful people (see Chapter 6). Ideas about falling birth rates, for instance, have become one way to slip extreme views about race science and demography into the mainstream. This is known as pronatalism (see Chapter 7). There are concerning links that this particular movement has with genetic testing companies that offer screening of embryos produced during IVF to see which will have the highest IQ (see Chapter 8).

One advocate of race science told me about policy papers he was writing for the prime minister at the time (see Chapter 9). 'Most elites actually know the score,' he said. 'You're talking about race and IQ?' I asked. 'Yeah,' my contact replied. 'People know that. It's not some huge secret.'

Among the rank and file members of far-right organisations, however, I was struck by their loneliness. In discussion groups, in city pubs, at secret meetings in the countryside, many of them spoke about feeling like outcasts, alienated and bored. They described their days of working in tedious, unfulfilling jobs, and evenings spent listening to hours-long fascist livestreams online. When they attended conferences, many of them tuned out of the talks (I used to count the nodding heads of

sleeping audience members, frequently reaching double figures) and looked forward most to the coffee breaks and post-event pints. Wanting connection is a common reason people give for arriving at these groups, and also what makes it hard for them to leave, even if they're not enjoying themselves.

A lot of the people I met were conspiracy theorists. Many claimed to have discovered the far right during the Covid pandemic, when lockdowns and masks and vaccines prompted baroque fantasies about the government trying to launch a genocide on its own people. Conspiracy theories can appeal to people who feel isolated, ignored and insignificant. Believing that a small elite controls the outcome of major world events could explain why one's own life might not be unfolding as planned. Rarely would adopting a conspiratorial outlook improve one's overall happiness and satisfaction, though.

What surprised me most was that despite my revulsion for what my new associates said and did, I often felt myself becoming friendly with them. It was hard not to. To fit in, I had to endear myself to new groups by being friendly and smiley. Naively, I hadn't reckoned on them being friendly and smiley back. They thought I was one of them. On long bus journeys with Britain First, they would shout at South Asian drivers, jeer at black people, and tell jokes about the Holocaust. Then they told me about their weight-loss goals and divorce proceedings, their grandchildren's birthday parties and their garden renovations, their girlfriend troubles and their summer holidays.

As they greeted me with cheers and handshakes, I told myself that what I was feeling was merely relief at their

acceptance of me. But was there also warmth? I felt a confusing mix of disgust at what they said and did, fear about my own exposure, and guilt. Guilt at befriending dozens of people with the intention of betraying them. As abhorrent as their views are, and as nasty as some of their actions may have been, these people invited me into their homes and shared intimate details with me about their lives and hopes and dreams. One day, I knew, I would have to sell them out.

I told myself that my new extremist friends, who frequently asserted the conspiracy theory that Jews control global affairs, would not have been so welcoming were I not white and male or had they known I came from a Jewish family. That it was only by making friends with neo-Nazis and Islamophobes that I could gain their trust and earn access to yet more extreme groups. That journalists covering the far right are lied to, and that only by spending time with these people undercover would it be possible to see what they're really like. This was all true. But the people I met are still human beings, and I felt like I was judasing them. It was grubby: that's why this book is called *Year of the Rat*.

Sometimes I was worried about the efficacy of undercover reporting. A hardcore conspiracy theorist is unlikely to ever change their mind. When my new friends eventually found out I had hoaxed them, might they feel more ostracised? Would they feel justified in their paranoia that mainstream society is out to get them, and double down in their beliefs?

There is dirt on my hands. I never wanted to entrap someone by prompting a hateful conversation, but I did

join in. On the Britain First battle bus, members shared antisemitic jokes and looked to me for one. I had to spend weekends canvassing votes for extremist candidates, holding my breath on election night in case they actually won (thankfully they didn't). For a white nationalist activist group, I put up offensive stickers at London universities. To get close to a race-science website, I had to give them editorial advice to make their operations run more smoothly. I could tell myself this was justified, but I was nonetheless complicit.

Much of the activism I participated in, particularly the anti-immigrant protests, can be traced back almost a century. In 1932, Oswald Mosley founded the British Union of Fascists, known for their blackshirt uniform inspired by the Nazi SS. During his years as a far-right campaigner, Mosley created a template that groups still follow. The techniques and talking points that he developed as an agitator first against Jews and then non-white immigrants seem indistinguishable from the extremist activism of today, with Mosleyite propaganda from the 1930s echoing in the groups I infiltrated.

Take, for instance, this article in *Action*, the official newspaper of Mosley's British Union of Fascists, dated 24 June 1939. I dug it out of the HOPE not hate archives. Headlined 'Behaviour of Jewish Exiles Disgusts Sandwich People', the report was about the arrival of Jewish men who had fled Nazi Germany and were now housed in a refugee camp in Sandwich on the south coast. The anonymous reporter complained of 'alien invaders' wrecking a 'picturesque Kent village'. The Jews, we learn, were enjoying a

'life of leisure' in fancy new clothes provided by the British taxpayer; they were also riding bicycles and going to the cinema. Local parents were apparently forming a vigilante group to prevent these Jews from 'forcing attentions on English girls'. The reporter concluded: 'If anyone wishes to discover the real cause of anti-Semitism, I advise them to take a trip down to Sandwich.'

This article could have been written by Britain First, were it focused on Muslims instead of Jews. While protesting at a camp for Afghan refugees – in Folkestone, just half an hour's drive from Sandwich – I repeatedly heard that native communities are being wrecked by the arrival of violently lascivious foreigners who enjoy luxury perks that white Britons go without. Paul Golding is forever posting on social media about 'native girls' and 'foreign sexual predators'. To him, refugee facilities are an insult to all patriots. While a cost of living crisis bites white citizens, sponging foreigners are enjoying the high life. 'Working-age chancers,' Paul calls them.

It is not just Britain First using the same language as Oswald Mosley. Government ministers spoke in his hateful vernacular while this project was going on. In spring 2023, Robert Jenrick, immigration minister at the time, delivered a speech about refugees that was remarkably similar to what was being said in the groups I infiltrated. 'Those crossing tend to have completely different lifestyles and values to those in the UK,' he said. Suella Braverman, then the home secretary, talked about refugees as an 'invasion' and a 'swarm', adding: 'Let's stop pretending they are all refugees in distress, the whole country knows that is not

true.' The former prime minister Liz Truss said Enoch Powell, who made the incendiary 1968 'Rivers of Blood' speech, 'had a point' on immigration.†

Powell, at the time a Conservative shadow minister, was sacked. Now I worry that views like his, once considered incompatible with public life, are becoming mainstream. Reform UK, whose leader Nigel Farage is an admirer of Powell's, was elected to Parliament in the 2024 election, along with four of his colleagues. His party has opened a front against multiculturalism, scapegoating it for Britain's underfunded public services. 'The unprecedented population explosion has pushed Britain to breaking point,' he writes in Reform's manifesto. It is alarming to think that four million people voted for his party, giving him the power now to influence the Conservative Party in opposition, and drive them further to the right.

This book draws on a definition of the far right as outlined by Cas Mudde, a political scientist at the University of Georgia. He describes it as an 'anti-system' ideology, hostile to liberal democracy. Far-right beliefs tend to encompass a mix of authoritarianism, sexism, xenophobia, racism and populism. 'Extreme right ideologies believe that inequalities are natural and outside of the purview of the state,' Mudde writes. 'They celebrate difference and hierarchy, and their core feature is elitism, which holds that some groups and individuals are superior to others and should therefore have more power.'

† In the speech, Powell quoted a man, purportedly a constituent, who told him: 'In this country in 15 or 20 years' time the black man will have the whip hand over the white man.'

The far-right belief I most commonly encountered was the view that shadowy forces are coordinating the mass migration of Asians and Africans into Europe in order to weaken and ultimately extinguish the white population. Known as the Great Replacement, it was perhaps first articulated by Adolf Hitler in *Mein Kampf*, who claimed that Jews were responsible for bringing colonial troops into occupied Rhineland after World War I so they could breed with Germans. Their children, insulted as *Rheinlandbastarden*, were among the first victims of Nazi sterilisations – eight hundred mixed-race children were forcibly castrated.

Academic researchers often draw a distinction between the extreme right and the radical right. Where these two tend to differ is in their views on democracy and violence. A radical right political party broadly believes in the democratic process, even if it opposes the rule of law or full rights for religious minorities or certain sexual orientations. An extreme right organisation, on the other hand, rejects democracy and is more likely to believe in violent action to achieve its goals.

While undercover, I noticed that this boundary between radical and extreme right could be messy. I saw radical-right politicians speaking at extreme-right conferences, cheered on by neo-Nazis as they described their growing poll numbers. Similarly, I met extreme-right members of radical-right parties who expressed a fondness for violence and a disdain for democracy, even as they handed out election leaflets. This book, which is a work of journalism and not academia, uses the more general term of 'far right'. More specific definitions are helpful when considering the differences of opinion across the political spectrum, but as