

Why was the New Zealand terrorist attack not prevented?

By Tom Peters
27 March 2019

Monday's episode of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's "Four Corners" program, "The Christchurch Massacre and the Rise of Right-wing Extremism," raised serious unanswered questions about how fascist and white supremacist Brenton Tarrant was able to carry out his terrorist attack on two mosques in Christchurch, New Zealand.

On March 15, Tarrant, an Australian citizen, killed 50 people and injured 50 more using a semi-automatic rifle. He had spent at least two years planning the massacre in the small city of Dunedin, south of Christchurch, where he trained at a nearby rifle club, wrote his 74-page manifesto and communicated with fascists internationally, including on extreme right message boards on the *8chan* website.

The attack has provoked widespread shock and anger in New Zealand, Australia and internationally. At vigils and rallies, many people have demanded to know how it could have happened. The state, however, has sought to severely restrict discussion of the most crucial questions, including the political roots of the massacre. In New Zealand, the censor's office banned possession and distribution of Tarrant's fascist manifesto, which outlines the gunman's political motives and influences—including US President Donald Trump—and connections with extreme right-wing circles internationally.

Canberra and Wellington have refused to explain why the state did not prevent Tarrant's attack despite his many public statements voicing hatred of immigrants, Muslims and socialists, including threats of violence. The New Zealand police and government insist that Tarrant flew "under the radar" and acted alone, despite his claims that he interacted with many extreme nationalist groups and had received a "blessing" for his attack from Norwegian far-right terrorist Anders Behring Breivik.

"Four Corners" reporter Sean Rubinsztein-Dunlop posed the question: "How did [Tarrant] manage to fly completely under the radar while planning a mass murder?" His report suggested that police and intelligence agencies had "underestimated" the threat of white supremacist attacks because they were focused on Islamic extremism; and that they are "drastically underfunded."

Neither of these explanations stands up to scrutiny. As the "Four Corners" program itself noted, there have been

numerous warnings about far-right extremism in Australia and New Zealand, and Christchurch has for decades been known as a centre of neo-Nazi activity.

There have been numerous acts of harassment, intimidation and threats against the city's Muslim community, including the Al-Noor mosque targeted by Tarrant. In 2016 neo-Nazi Philip Arps was fined \$800 for delivering a box of pigs' heads to the mosque. Police have not explained why they did nothing to protect the mosque following this very clear threat.

Another 18-year-old man, who has not been publicly identified, has been charged with posting threats against the mosque on Facebook days before the massacre. Again, there has been no explanation of why police took no action until after the shooting.

For years, Tarrant posted comments on Facebook praising the fascist and anti-Islamic United Patriots Front in Australia and threatening to kill "Marxists and globalists." Two days before his attack, "Four Corners" noted, the terrorist "flooded Facebook with posts on extreme right-wing themes... [and] posted photos on Twitter of guns and magazines covered with symbols of his fascist ideology." None of this triggered any intervention by police.

The timeline of the day of the massacre raises an even more disturbing question: Why was Tarrant not stopped even after he publicly revealed his exact plans?

At midday, he posted links to his manifesto, which clearly identifies his targets, on Facebook. At 1:28 p.m. he shared the document on *8chan* along with a message saying he would carry out an "attack against the invaders," and links to a livestream video. Three minutes later he emailed his manifesto to 70 email addresses, including the prime minister's office and media organisations. He began live-streaming while driving carefully to the first of two mosques. Tarrant was clearly not worried about being intercepted: his gun is visible in the car and his GPS navigation system can be clearly heard directing him to the first of two mosques. The attack began at 1:40 p.m.

As Robert Evans, an analyst from the Bellingcat think tank, told "Four Corners", anyone monitoring the neo-Nazi forum would have seen Tarrant's message and video and "could have reached out to law enforcement in New Zealand and warned

them about what was going to happen and cut down the response time before armed police units arrived to intercept them, significantly.”

Instead, the gunman was able to carry out his attack calmly, at one point leaving the mosque, walking casually outside, then returning to shoot any injured people. A total of 41 people died at Al Noor mosque. Tarrant’s video ended after 17 minutes, while he was driving to the smaller Linwood mosque where he continued his killing spree. Tarrant was arrested 36 minutes after the first emergency call was made to police as the attack began, while on his way to a third mosque in Ashburton.

Evans described *8chan* as “a 24-hour Klan or neo-Nazi rally where every now and then someone will leave in order to commit a violent attack.” The obvious question, which has not been raised in the media, is: were any of the millions of police and spies in New Zealand, Australia, the US, Europe and elsewhere monitoring the well-known far-right forum? And, if so, why did they apparently do nothing to stop the attack?

Neil Fergus, an analyst from the think tank Intelligent Risks, told “Four Corners” that the gunman’s social media posts sounded alarms, but New Zealand’s spy agencies were “not particularly well-served in terms of resources.”

This claim is utterly false. Like previous terrorist attacks internationally, including the September 11, 2001 attack in the US, the Christchurch atrocity is already being used to demand even more anti-democratic powers for New Zealand’s Security Intelligence Service (SIS), Government Communications Security Bureau (GCSB) and the police. These agencies have received a vast increase in funding, personnel and technical capability over the past two decades. Legal restrictions on their ability to spy on the population are practically non-existent.

Security analyst Paul Buchanan told Radio NZ that in 2017, the year Tarrant moved to New Zealand, police conducted 7,000 warrantless searches, an extraordinary number for a country with fewer than five million people. The GCSB and SIS also have the power to conduct electronic surveillance of anyone in New Zealand under legislation pushed through in 2014, ostensibly aimed at combating terrorism.

The GCSB is part of the Five Eyes network, led by the US National Security Agency, which also includes the spy agencies of Australia, Britain and Canada. As whistleblower Edward Snowden revealed, the NSA and its partners spy on billions of communications all over the world and share information with each other.

There is no innocent explanation for the fact that these agencies, with multi-billion dollar budgets and vast powers and capabilities, failed to monitor Tarrant. The gunman travelled to several countries in Europe, as well as Pakistan, North Korea and, according to some reports, Afghanistan, countries that are under heavy surveillance.

Evans told “Four Corners” that if the gunman had registered as a firearms owner and was commenting on radical Islamic Facebook pages advocating holy war, “I think the governments

of New Zealand and... Australia would absolutely have been looking into this person before the shooting.”

While Muslims, environmental groups, pacifist groups and others have been under heavy surveillance, the fascist networks in New Zealand and Australia have been allowed to operate without interference from the state.

The explanation for this is political: the anti-Marxism expressed by Tarrant and the fascist tendencies that inspired him is shared by the political establishment and the state. In his manifesto, Tarrant estimates that hundreds of thousands of members of the police and armed forces in Europe are members of far-right nationalist groups, a statement which raises questions about whether Tarrant had any contact with state agencies.

The main function of the spy agencies and the police over the past century has been to prevent the growth of a socialist movement in the working class. There are countless examples of police infiltration of socialist and leftist groups in the US, Australia and New Zealand, dating back to before the Russian Revolution.

The Christchurch attacks took place in a definite political context of economic breakdown, trade war and growing preparations for war by the US and its allies. Trump, in his violent rants against socialism, expresses openly the fears of the ruling class everywhere, which has been shaken by the upsurge in class struggle over the past year.

The political establishment has increasingly adopted the anti-immigrant and anti-Muslim demagoguery of the extreme-right in order to divide the working class. Parties such as Australia’s One Nation and New Zealand First, which is a major part of the Labour-led government, have expressed racist and xenophobic views similar to those in Tarrant’s manifesto.

The attack in Christchurch must be taken as a sharp warning of the forces that are being prepared to be used against the working class. Workers and young people internationally must make their own political preparations by building a socialist movement to put an end to the capitalist system and its division of the world into nation-states, which is the source of nationalism, racism and war.

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