

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JULIEN TERZICS,
EX-SKINHEAD HUNTER

with RAPHAEL OF STORY NEXT DOOR
Translated from the French by DAVID CAMPBELL

When you look at what Paris has become and how it's changing now, it's hard to imagine that not that long ago some neighborhoods in the capital, like Châtelet¹ or the Jardins de Luxembourg² used to be skinhead territory. Skinhead . . . just the word itself, because of what it represents in the collective consciousness, because of its history, sends a shiver up the spine. They wreaked havoc in Paris in the 80s and early 90s. At the time, their violent actions provoked a response. This took the form of a group of friends determined to give it back blow for blow, fighting the fash,³ as they say, face to face. And so the Red Warriors were born, one of the first skinhead-hunter groups. Julien Terzics, still a teenager when it started, was one of the leaders. He has, of course, taken a step back from that era upon which he left such a distinct mark, a mark which is today outside of the public eye. I meet not with the teen that he was, but the adult, the father of a family, that he has become.

1. Now a shopping district

2. An upscale park in a wealthy residential area

3. "Fash" is an English-language slang term for fascist. The original French text uses the term "faf," from "FAF," or "France Aux Français," meaning "France for the French," a right-wing anti-immigrant slogan that was turned into a pejorative label by the far left.

RAPHAEL: To get us situated, when and where did you grow up?

It's kind of hard to situate myself in that way. I'm from a Hungarian Jewish background. My parents are both Hungarian. I come from a broken home, as they say. My parents separated very early, when I was four. I grew up with my mother in the eastern suburbs, the suburbs of Paris. My dad painted houses. He lived in the 20th arrondissement, on Boulevard de Ménilmontant. So I actually mostly grew up in the eastern suburbs, in Val de Fontenay. Around ten, twelve years old, my father got back in touch with us. So then I really started hanging around the Ménilmontant neighborhood.

What year was that?

You do the math, I was born in '68. So the end of the 70s, around then.

How did the skinhead-hunter period start and how old were you then?

The skinhead-hunter period can't really be defined. There's not a precise date. I started out as a punk, first off. I was twelve, thirteen years old, it was around 1980, '81. At that time, I was starting to hang out with guys who were a little bit older than me. We were going to concerts, to squats . . . We learned quickly and the hard way that the "dominant" tribe was the skinheads who were, at that time, mainly fascist skinheads. So we were going through it from very early on. It was this long-running school of sorts where we were getting more and more pissed off. In '85 or '86, when I was seventeen or eighteen, we'd had it up to here, so we started hanging out in groups

and defending ourselves, but you can't give an exact date to the beginning of it. If you had to give a date to the beginning of the Red Warriors, it was in December of '86. That's kind of the key date 'cause it's the moment when we gave a name to our thing. But by that point we'd already been hanging out in a group for a few years. We noticed that when there were five or six of us and we didn't back down against the skinheads, the game changed, totally. Nobody's a superman. Anybody, even a big drunk skinhead, if you give him a right hook to the back of the skull, if you don't back down, things change. So I can't really give you an exact date, but generally, it's the creation of the Red Warriors in December of '86 that marks the official start of our project. Again, the roots go back much earlier, when we started getting tired of putting up with the fash.

You specified "fascist skinheads." How would you define a skinhead?

That's a long story. The original skinhead movement has its roots in England at the end of the 60s. It's what you'd call a subculture, which at the beginning was anything but fash. It was nothing more and nothing less than mingling between the young people from the English working class and the young people from the Jamaican immigrant community, former English colony as we all know, who emigrate on a massive scale to England. Jamaica and England are kind of like Algeria and France. These young Jamaicans bring with them their music, rocksteady, Jamaican rhythm'n'blues . . . and for whatever reason, there was some kind of alchemy at work. We'll never really know why. White working-class English youth adopted this music. It's like if today French Caribbeans arrived with

zouk, and the young working-class French people started to get into it, to the point that it becomes a movement . . . That's what happened in England with rocksteady. Ultimately, the skinhead movement was born of this meeting of the idle working-class Jamaican youth and the idle, white, working-class English youth. At the beginning, the skinhead movement was racially mixed. If there had been no young Black Jamaicans, there would have been no skinhead movement. That's why I'm saying that at the beginning, the word skinhead was anything but racist. It could possibly be considered apolitical in the sense that it was more of a thing of groups of friends, neighborhoods, music . . . They had dress codes and musical codes, but it was absolutely not a fascist movement.

The skinhead movement lost some momentum in the mid-70s. With the arrival of the punk wave, it picked up again a little. Unfortunately for everyone, the British National Front had its heart set on trying to indoctrinate these young skinheads. It was trying to make good use of them as some muscle for hanging posters, to sum it up. That's when the skinhead movement starts getting into the paramilitary thing of the far right. The guys keep calling themselves skinheads even though it's absolute nonsense. And by the way, the real skinheads, non-fascist and non-racist, don't consider them skinheads. They call them boneheads. All that, that's stuff that we know today, but you really have to understand that at the end of the 70s, beginning of the 80s, middle of the 80s, a skinhead, for a normal dude, ordinary guy, is a big drunk Nazi, shaved head, with a paramilitary camouflage bomber jacket, etc. Me, all this culture of the original skinhead movement, I discovered it later. Before, it didn't interest me. I didn't even know it existed. I

was confronted by what I was seeing every day when I was going to concerts: big shaved skinheads with French flags, Celtic crosses, swastikas . . . for me, that was what a skinhead was. It was much later that I learned that it was a rich and important subculture, which still exists today!

So it wasn't cultural any more but political. In that case, why were the skinheads giving you a hard time, a guy who's white and punk? Punk is a culture.

The skinheads, the ones we were confronted with, were more just big dumb idiots. Clearly, these guys were not political. They defined themselves as fash by the trappings that they wore. In reality they were just these kinds of thick brutes concealing a violent pathology behind a political discourse, but which was actually nonexistent. For that matter, the big French skinhead leaders, like Ayoub⁴ for example . . . if you scratch at the surface a little, you'll see it's just absolute nonsense . . . "foreigners" who claim to be proud of the white race. It was mostly these kinds of psychopaths, drunkards, ultraviolent people, who were putting out this violent sickness behind a discourse that couldn't stand on its own. Us, we really didn't give a shit. We didn't feel like unpacking all that. We were suffering this violence. At a

4. Serge Ayoub, a public figure in far-right French politics. He was a fascist skinhead in his youth, known then as "Batskin" for his propensity for beating his opponents with a baseball bat.

certain point, we organized ourselves against it. At first, it was a survival reaction. At that time, I wasn't politicized at all. I didn't have the slightest idea about anything at all. What I was living, it was just the real, physical, violent relationship of contact. Over time you analyze, but at the beginning we didn't give a fuck. We just knew that when the skinheads showed up, we identified them by the way they dressed, it was danger. We went into survival mode.

5. "Gang culture" here means the social practice of hanging out in groups in public spaces, not the intricate symbols, hierarchies, coded language, etc. of more formalized gang structures. The original French reads "culture de la bande." "Bande" in French means a small group or pack of people. In English, this might also be called a gang, but in the sense of "a gang of youths," not the entire apparatus of a criminal organization. I have translated the same word, "bande," as "pack" in the following sentence to convey this sense.

When you formed the Red Warriors, even if you'd existed for a while already, before having defined it, how did it work? You'd go down into Paris, I'm thinking of Châtelet for example, and you'd search for skinheads?

At the beginning, we weren't searching for anyone. At the beginning, we just realized that when there were more of us, we were less vulnerable. As a result, it became simple logic when we were going to a concert where shit might get crazy. We didn't know who we were gonna come across, or who was gonna show up . . . At the time, it wasn't only skinheads. There were a bunch of tribes. We quickly discovered and understood that the more of us there were, the better it was. This gang culture had always existed.⁵ In the 50s, the butchers' boys going to dances, they went as a pack. It wasn't new. Us, we just realized that if you had

a solid affinity group, you were less vulnerable. That was the first reaction. Little by little, we realized that it was really effective, that it was working. We ended up having such a solid affinity group that we gave ourselves a name and became known by that name. It wasn't until then that we realized that we were starting to have a sort of aura that gave us a certain responsibility, in terms of what we were and what we were doing. At first, we weren't representing anything but ourselves. Then we started to represent something else, something a bit vague, but we were aware of representing guys who were organizing against a certain vision of life, against a certain gratuitous violence, against certain principles that didn't work for us, like saying "here we are, there's more of us, so we're imposing our point of view." We were defending ourselves against that. Then it got politicized as it went along. We became conscientious as we went along, but at the outset, we were guys from the suburbs who had nothing to do with all that. You were giving us shit, we defended ourselves, end of story.

The skinheads were in certain parts of Paris, clearly identified at the time. You chased them off, but in and of itself, we would tend to think that that should rather have been the role of the police. Did you have the impression that you were performing a civil service?

Me, I don't see it like that at all. Having performed the role of the police, I'm not hearing that at all, either. We didn't chase off the skinheads. It's just that there was a reality at a given moment: certain neighborhoods of Paris were practically no-go zones for certain types of people. So watch out! If you were some basic white French guy, not trendy, not aware of any-

thing, during the 80s, you could cross the Parc de Luxembourg without even realizing what was going on, even though it was a nest of fascist skinheads for a minute there. On the other hand, if you were in one of these tribes in the subculture, believe me, crossing through there, it was nuts. We simply decided at a given moment that there wouldn't be any neighborhoods in Paris that we wouldn't go into anymore, that we'd be afraid to go into. We weren't going there just to go there, but if we had something to do there, we'd get together and we'd go there. Of course, that meant clashes. The fact is that we started to no longer prohibit ourselves from going anywhere. There were confrontations like that where the other guys, they felt in danger on their own turf. But it wasn't a civil service. We weren't even aware of all that. Frankly, we didn't give a shit. For me, citizenship is a term that I don't even invoke. To speak of citizens is to put everyone on equal footing, while we're not all equal. There are rich people, poor people . . . We didn't give a fuck about that, but at the same time we knew that if we had a concert at a certain place, we'd say to each other, "fuck, it's hot, the skinheads from Bonsergent are there, the concert's right there, they're definitely gonna be there . . . who gives a shit, we're going anyway." But then we'd go there as a group, and we'd be ready. If they were there . . . Bam! We'd hit 'em. The dudes were getting beaten on their own turf, so of course things changed. The times when they thought themselves masters of the neighborhood were over. The fear had changed sides.

You say that you were made conscious, politicized, as you went along. You also repeated several times that you were

just a group of buddies that reacted to an untenable situation. At what point did you become aware of the magnitude of your reaction to the skinheads?

That was completely over our heads. At the beginning, we did not define ourselves as antifa. We called ourselves skinhead hunters. We weren't conscious of it because it wasn't a defined political action. We just decided to give ourselves the means to go wherever we wanted from there on out without being afraid of anyone. In practice, we became the ones who were bashing the fash. There were some guys who were older than us who knew that those guys were Nazis, and that we were these young guys coming up behind them. They saw us, kids that we were, give it back in their faces, clearing out fash that had been making the law for ten years. It was the guys who were older than us, politicized, who told us that we didn't realize what we were doing. They told us, "You're radical anti-fascists, you're clearing out the Nazis," and we were there like, "Oh, we are?!" For us it wasn't politics, it was street brawling and survival. The places we liked to go were squats, concerts, we were hanging out in the streets, we were hanging out in the metro, we were in danger in those places. So we decided to defend them.

Growing up, because I was seventeen the first time I went to the clink, we had been confronted by these older guys in the squat scene, in the alternative scene, etc. They explained to us, concretely, that the approach we had was politically interesting. They theorized with precise words a thing that we were doing in an instinctive way. That sums up the Red Warriors, we didn't know what we wanted but we all had one thing in common, we couldn't stand the fash, because of what they

6. *Action Directe* was a French anarchist-communist urban guerilla group active from 1979 to 1987.

7. *SOS Racisme* is a French anti-racism and anti-xenophobia non-profit organization, founded by Julien Dray and Harlem Désir, leading members of the French Socialist Party.

were putting us through on a daily basis. In the Red Warriors, there were some guys from the far left, radical far left, close to Action Directe,⁶ and you had other guys closer to the socialist party of Julien Dray and Harlem Désir, SOS Racisme in '88.⁷ There were some arguments, but what brought us all together, it was a radical approach to antifascism, being ready to go all the way against those guys. That's why I'm telling you that it was instinctive, wild, completely improvised, it came from the gut.

Generally, when you're seventeen, eighteen years old, you're not going to the clink, you're in high school, you get your diploma and you think about what comes next. Did you have a normal life aside from the Red Warriors?

I was one of the few to go to high school. I ended up in jail. We were young guys from the suburbs. The others had shitty jobs. I clung to my studies. I stopped them, picked them back up again, etc. I'm one of the few who did higher education afterwards.

You guys were joined by other groups, also calling themselves skinhead hunters.

We didn't have much to do with them. Well . . . there were a few groups around at the same time as the Red Warriors, with whom we were in agreement, with whom we worked

a fair amount. But very quickly, we saw these teams of guys appear who had some behaviors that didn't work for us at all.

Then the skinheads no longer made “the law” in Paris . . .

They just simply disappeared. At the turn of the 90s, let's say '92, '93, the ones who were the big dominant skinheads five, six years earlier, meaning the big shaved skull, khaki bomber jacket, French flags, those guys, they disappeared. You didn't see them anymore. They knew that it was becoming too physically dangerous for them to walk around town like that. I'm not telling you that the fash has disappeared, but the reason for our existence didn't exist anymore. We weren't gonna keep on hanging around and hunting skinheads that didn't exist anymore. If you do that you're starting to invent imaginary enemies, and that's kind of what happened with the groups with shadier characters in them.

At that point, what were you doing? What direction did you give to your life?

At that point, I got my high school diploma, I went to college. I studied history. I kept at it until the first year of a PhD. After that time [with the Red Warriors], we had gotten some experience and we had started to politicize ourselves, but in the etymological sense of the term, meaning getting involved with organizations, etc. That hadn't been the case before. Myself, to give you a bit of an idea, in '94 I was involved with the CNT [*Confédération Nationale du Travail*], a far-left union, anarcho-sindicalist. I did activist work like crazy for fifteen years in that libertarian communist union. I was even confederal secretary for two years. I devoted myself to a militant struggle, politics, pure pol-

itics. After the Red Warriors, I realized that if there were fash, it was because there was fertile ground for them to appear in. What is that fertile ground? Etc., etc., etc. I got political, I grew, I read, I met people . . . the years that followed the Red Warriors, those were years of pure militant activism.

Today, antifa still exists. Young people claim the label antifa. Who, what are they fighting against? There aren't skinheads in the streets anymore.

There aren't skinheads in the streets anymore, or at least skinheads the way we knew them twenty years ago. Of course they're not around anymore, but there's a new generation of street activists who are super-fascist all the same, clearly identified as the "identitarians," Gabriac's crews, the *jeunesse nationaliste*⁸ . . . I could go on and on. They're out there. They don't have the same look, but they still exist. They're younger, they've adapted to their times, they're mastering multimedia, they're mastering communications, programming, social media . . . Today's antifa do a lot of fighting on that terrain. In my opinion, they're losing sight of the streets a bit, but it's not at all comparable. I know that today's antifascists, they look at guys like me, not fondly, but in a particular way. I'll be forty-seven in November. I could be

8. Alexandre Gabriac, a public figure in far-right French politics, was the head of the *Jeunesse Nationaliste* [Nationalist Youth], a now-defunct white nationalist organization.

the father of most of the antifascists I know today. They have a certain respect for what we did, but in no way do they feel dependent on it. And I'm not claiming they should . . . I don't know them, they don't know me, we're no longer speaking about the same thing. In our day, there was no internet, no cellphones . . . I don't claim to have any power to direct them. I'm a guy they respect in relation to what he was, but at the same time they know that today, we have nothing in common anymore. And it's just fine like that. More than anything, I have no desire to cast a shadow over them. I make it a point of pride to distinguish myself from them, in the sense that the times are different. They master better some things that we never mastered because they didn't exist. So Godspeed! Now, I can have my judgments in relation to what's happening. Me, personally, maybe I wouldn't do certain things like them, but I don't allow myself to say it. And by the way, that was one of the reasons that I left Paris. I preferred to go into retirement.

You left Paris. Before that, you knew a Paris that a lot of people had no idea about. As you said, people who don't want to see, don't see. It simply wasn't their reality. Today, how do you see the evolution of Paris?

I've lived for five years in the countryside, in the South of France. It's pretty strange. When I left, I couldn't take Paris anymore. Seriously, if you had told me that that would happen to me one day, I wouldn't have believed it. But five years ago, I just couldn't anymore. I wanted something else. I had kids, too. Ironically, the Paris of today, I appreciate it more, but because I don't live there anymore. I go up there, I find myself doing things I didn't do when I lived here, like wander-

ing around neighborhoods where I never used to set a fucking foot. And then, Paris is still the city where I was born, where I lived forty-two years of my life, but to tell you the truth, I don't feel like coming back here to live.

You come back into Paris regularly to manage your bars, like TDTF. What's your life like these days? Running your two bars, TDTF and le Saint-Saveur?

My life isn't only that. I've had le Saint-Saveur [11 Rue des Panoyaux, 75020, Paris] for about ten years, and TDTF [43 Rue Cavendish, 75019 Paris] for about ten days. In the South of France, I have a big motorcycle repair shop. I have two little boys, Sacha and Vadim. Actually, more than anything, that's what my life's about, taking care of my kids. In the South, adjacent to the repair shop, we have a concert hall. I do a whole lot of things. The two bars in Paris are mostly bars that are managed by the people who work there. That's what makes me happy. It's in line with my convictions, I'm not gonna say anarcho-syndicalist because that's a bit of an exaggeration, but what I mean is I've managed to get two businesses up and running that are practically self-run by the people who work there. I come in, I don't worry about anything, the people are there. Legally, in France, things are done in such a way so that there must be someone who's legally responsible . . . that's me. On the other hand, things are practically self-run by the people who work there. That's one of the things I'm most proud of, to have gotten two things up and running in Paris that give a lot of work to people. It's pretty gratifying. In the South I do plenty of other things, but they're more related to my lifestyle today.

In the days when you created the Red Warriors, fascism was embodied by the skinheads present in the street. They're no longer around, but does that fascism still exist in France?

I think you know the answer to your question. Of course what they call the “Le Pen-ization” of opinion is undeniable. The talking points that the National Front had twenty years ago, now it's Sarkozy who has them.⁹ That's the Le Pen-ization of opinion. What bothers me today is that maybe there aren't skinheads like you might have seen twenty-five years ago in the streets, but those guys' ideas have gained a lot of ground. There are a ton of political organizations and politicians who have given up in the face of that. The speeches that, say, Sarkozy has given, or even recently Nadine Morano, when she says that France is a country of “the white race.”¹⁰ If Le Pen had said that twenty years ago, there would've been protests with 100,000 people in the streets. That's what I mean. At a certain point, the fash won the battle of ideas. Their talking points became normalized. [. . .] The fascists are gaining ground because we're moving backwards. If we move backwards, they move forward, end of story. This type of speech of the “republican” right [center-right] which is no longer running behind the National Front but starting to run in front of it, it's criminal. They're hoping to

9. Nicolas Sarkozy is a conservative politician who served as president of France from 2007 to 2012. Marine Le Pen is the head of the National Front (since 2018 rebranded the National Rally), a far-right nationalist party founded by her father. Le Pen has successfully moved the party away from its openly neo-Nazi roots and mainstreamed many of its ideas.

10. Nadine Morano, a conservative elected official.

swallow them, while they're the ones who are gonna end up getting eaten. I won't even touch the reformist left, as it's totally paralyzed.

To end, if you had to send a message to the youth . . . ?

I'm not too much in the habit of sending messages . . . I've already said it several times, the only message that I have to send is this: we'll all get out of this together, or we won't get out of it at all. We're all in the same boat . . .

Which sums up nicely your adventures, when you and your group were facing off against the skinheads.

That's it. Black, white, yellow, green, Muslim, Jew, what-have-you, but at a given moment, either we all get outta this together, or we don't get out at all.

Thank you.

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: This interview, originally carried out on September 29, 2015, and published at storynextdoor.com on January 20, 2016, exists within the context of rising far-right activity and its entrance into mainstream electoral politics in France, a context that will doubtless sound familiar to many US readers. The year of 2015 is generally identified as the peak of the European migrant crisis, which profoundly changed the political landscape in significant ways, including an upsurge in xenophobia and support for far-right policies. A year and a half after the interview was conducted, the far-right Marine Le Pen narrowly lost to centrist Emmanuel Macron in the French presidential elections, revealing just how far the "Le Pen-ization" of public opinion, the

normalization of far-right talking points, had come.

Though this interview dates from late 2015, it is very timely for a contemporary US readership after four years of Trumpism and resistance to it. Many who know a bit about the history of antifascist action or punk music in the United States know that it started with anti-racist skinheads confronting Nazi skinheads at punk venues and in the streets. What most don't know is that a similar dynamic played out in France at roughly the same time. In the mid-80s, parts of Paris were overrun with Nazi skinheads whose word was law. Julien Terzics and a multi-racial band of punks fought back, part of a broad street-level movement that ultimately caused the fascist skinheads to disappear from public view.¹

1. More information about Julien Terzics, the Red Warriors, and the 80s Paris skinhead scene can be found in the 2008 documentary *Antifa: Chasseurs de Skins*, available with English subtitles from several online sources. For further reading, see Kemi Alemoru, "I Spent the 80s Having Streetfights with Skinheads in Paris." *Dazed*, October 13, 2016, <https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/33333/1/we-led-a-gang-war-against-racist-skinheads-in-80s-paris>; and "A Skinhead in Paris, 1979-83." *Creases Like Knives*, August 3, 2016, <https://creaseslikeknives.wordpress.com/2016/08/03/a-skinhead-in-paris-1979-83/>

I find this interview particularly engaging because many of the antifascist activists I know, myself included, start with theory and then arrive at action. Terzics and his friends, like many of the antifascist punks and skinheads of the 80s and 90s, started with action. They “had no idea about anything” in terms of politics, he says. They became radicalized over the years as they drew attention and praise for their antifascist work. His story reminds us that the slogan “antifascism is self-defense” is viscerally, personally, literally true for some, and that in those cases, action necessarily takes priority over theory. It is strangely refreshing, too, to read an account that cuts through the heated discussion of antifa’s more controversial tactics and shows unequivocally that sometimes, it really is as simple as punching Nazis.

Often, of course, it is not. Terzics started with action, but he finished with theory: he went on to get a

master’s degree and work as an organizer in the anarcho-syndicalist CNT union. As he explains, he knows that the world has changed much since his days fighting boneheads in the streets, and both fascism and antifascism with it. His candor, lucidity, and humility should serve as a reminder to all of us that while “bashing the fash” is important, effective, and for some, essential, there is much more to antifascism than that.

NOTE ON THE TRANSLATION: More than anything, I hate to cut things out of a translation, but sometimes it becomes necessary. I was tempted to cut “green” from Terzics’ last line, as it may seem to tokenize or relativize the identities of people of color, but then, it’s not my job to interpret, only to translate, and if an antifascist from another time, place, and generation says one or two things that strike us as a little off-color, that’s OK. I cut one short passage where Terzics is essentially

repeating himself and listing more and more far-right figures and organizations, which I felt would be overwhelming to an American audience. Other than that, I have left the original text intact, adding (I hope) enough footnotes and bracketed explanations to make it accessible to an American audience, but not so many as to make it overwhelming.

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