

PRISMA

Primer on Radical Information for Secure Militant Actions

Part 1/2



No Trace Project / No trace, no case. A collection of tools to help anarchists and other rebels **understand** the capabilities of their enemies, **undermine** surveillance efforts, and ultimately **act** without getting caught.

Depending on your context, possession of certain documents may be criminalized or attract unwanted attention. Be careful about what zines you print and where you store them.

PRISMA: Primer on Radical Information for Secure Militant Actions Part 1/2

Original text in German

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2010

web.archive.org/web/20250611231250/https://militanz.blackblogs.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/481/2017/11/Prisma.pdf

Translation and layout

No Trace Project

notrace.how/resources/#prisma

- Names, legal and actual addresses, dates of birth.
- Personal situation and responsibilities (e.g. job, children, care for parents, pets.)
- Living situation (e.g. living with parents, alone, with roommates.)
- Who should be contacted in an emergency?
- How do they relate to things like stress, health, fears?
- Distribution of tasks and preferences for actions.
- Wishes for lawyers (possibly powers of attorney.)
- History of repression (cases, convictions, probation, surveillance...)
- Sharing experiences of repression to be better prepared.
- Dealing with repression and the refusal to testify.
- What kind of support is desired in case of arrests (e.g. solidarity actions)?
- How do they evaluate risks and successes?
- What to do in different emergency situations (cops, “good citizens”, direct confrontation, prosecution.)

Discuss Emergency Situations Together!

Everyone should prepare for repression and emergency situations, preferably together. The book “Weg durch die Wüste”⁵ (*Paths Through the Desert*) can serve as a basis for discussion. A wide range of information is also available from Rote Hilfe⁶ and Ermittlungsausschuss.⁷ Important topics include arrests, house raids, pre-trial detention, prison, refusal to testify, lawyers, and how trials work.

You should also discuss how to react if an injury happens. What to do if someone is injured (lightly, moderately, or seriously)? Can people find trustworthy doctors? One thing is clear: in an emergency, health comes first! Remember that injuries can happen not only during actions, but also during preparation.

⁵<https://archive.org/details/Weg.durch.die.Wueste>

⁶*N.T.P. note:* Rote Hilfe is a German prisoner support group.

⁷*N.T.P. note:* Ermittlungsausschuss (*Investigation Committee*) is a German legal support group.

as producing the action materials, shopping, writing an action claim, publishing it the next day, etc. For example, it can be very helpful if the people who are building an incendiary device during the day (and thus may come into contact with gasoline) are not present at the action that night—this takes pressure off everyone involved and, if someone is arrested, it reduces the risk of traces being found on their body.

Communication Structures

Communication in small autonomous groups is not easy. Phone calls, texts, emails... all of these modern communication channels can be easily monitored and are therefore unsuitable for clandestine organizing. So we continue to rely on face-to-face meetings, which of course are not without risk. It's not always easy to find a suitable place to meet and talk. The criteria should be that the place is unlikely to be bugged (i.e. not your apartment or a bar you regularly frequent), there are no other people within earshot, and ideally it isn't obvious from a distance that you're having a clandestine meeting. For added security, during the meeting you can avoid mentioning locations, names, and dates (and also avoid showing them with hand gestures), writing them down instead. Be careful because this can be very conspicuous.

It's also important to think about how to communicate in an emergency situation. After house raids and the like, the cops sometimes pay very close attention to who is talking to whom or who is meeting up. It can be helpful to arrange an emergency meeting point for this scenario. To share information or arrange meeting details, it's also a good idea to think about who is already seeing each other in everyday life (at home, work, school or university) so that arrangements can be made inconspicuously. This can also be a way to create information relays.

Getting to Know Each Other

If repression happens, what should we know about each other in order to feel safe and trust that the others will take care of everything? Although this will certainly vary from person to person, here are some suggestions of what information might be important:

Note from the No Trace Project:

Compared to the original PRISMA zine, this translation includes chapters one, three, four and five, except for paragraphs and sections related to computer or phone security that we deemed outdated. It does not include chapters two (“The Goals and Motives of Militant Politics”) and six (“Action Tactics”) because they are outside the scope of our project.

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mailbox or post office can be traced. If you pay with a bank card, the data is stored... So there are always traces and they cannot be avoided. The crucial question is whether they can be traced back to you. There are no “one size fits all” solutions—we must thoroughly think through each step (even the preparatory steps) and, if possible, collectively discuss them.

Have fun and good luck!

Anti-Repression and Emergency Plans

In small autonomous groups—be prepared for emergencies together!

We believe it is important for militant groups to prepare for what needs to happen if something goes wrong. In addition to concrete preparations for the action, we should discuss the participants life situations, possible fears, communication channels, and what to do in emergencies such as an injury or repression. Here are some thoughts, based either on our experience or our expectations.

The better we know each other and the more we prepare for emergencies in sufficient detail, the better we can act or react at the crucial moment. In difficult situations (e.g. particularly committed citizens acting as auxiliary police, arrests, etc.), panic sets in quickly. Already having a clear plan of how to react is very helpful, because at this point there's usually no time to think. Of course, detailed preparation is not a cure-all. There are always situations in which fear causes us to ignore all previous agreements. So it's especially important for contingency plans to be part of the preparation. Each individual, their fears, insecurities, and life situation should be taken into account. Everyone should feel safe and be able to rely on the others. On the basis of such trust, we can overcome our fears together. Our limits are certainly different, but there are usually solutions (e.g. by discussing task distribution openly and honestly). For example, someone may not like being the lookout because they know that they will panic if they have nothing to do and may give a stop signal before it is actually necessary. Someone else, on the other hand, may already have trouble throwing and aiming even before taking fear into account, so when the excitement of the action is added to the mix, nothing works. So think carefully about who is best suited for each role. Think also about preparation tasks, such

there moments of anxiety for the participants, and how can such situations be handled? Sharing individual coping strategies can also be helpful.

An important part of the post-action period is recovery. Since almost all direct actions necessarily involve a period of intense concentration and time pressure, it is important to allow yourself and your social environment to recover. A mentality of “the fight is my life” doesn't help anyone. Apart from the effects of this mentality on group dynamics, a lack of breaks and recovery phases also limits performance and concentration.

Some time after the action, you can evaluate its political and strategic aspects. This evaluation can include the initial public reactions and, on this basis, you can assess whether the method and goal of the action matched your political intentions. Was the impact as you imagined it? Were there any shortcomings, and how can they be addressed next time? In some cases, it makes sense to somehow publicly communicate about the action at a later date. Although publishing an action claim may be part of the initial plan, you can always publish an additional explanation later. Public communication should distinguish between at least three intended audiences: the “general public,” the “direct public” (e.g. through flyers in the neighborhood), and the “scene public.” It's important to think carefully about who you want to address, with what information, how, and why.

A Final Note on Security

Achieving complete security simply isn't possible. Every action has a risk. That means dealing with potential consequences and determining the implications of a worst case scenario, if someone gets caught. Police investigations often thrive on chance, but in almost all cases, it's avoidable mistakes that ultimately lead investigators on the right track. But mistakes can be avoided. The key is to have as detailed a plan as possible that specifies what to do and what not to do at each step of the action. This way, you can think about what traces you might leave behind at each step. And, during the action, you can take appropriate countermeasures. If you have to climb over a pointy fence, be prepared for clothing fibers to get caught. If you walk over sand or soil, be prepared for shoeprints. If you make a phone call, the call can be traced. If you send a letter, the

1. Let's Go...

Hello! It's nice that you're holding this booklet in your hands! We don't want to keep you from reading for too long, but we'd like to start by saying what motivated us to put this booklet together (and what didn't).

We are quite a motley crew, active in struggles ranging from opposition to the nuclear industry to opposition to racism against the Roma. In our experience, we have found that it is often difficult to find an overview of different forms of action, especially militant ones, as well as practical and contextual thoughts on different aspects of security and action planning. Sometimes it's the little things that cause headaches, like how to fill the fire extinguisher with paint. A lot of clever writing has already been published, but where? Not everyone has an archive of *radikal*¹ in their closet, and rummaging through old issues, as nice as it is, takes a lot of time and is not possible everywhere. That's why we have collected information about taking action.

Collected in the sense that we hope that while browsing through these pages, you'll come across an idea that you hadn't thought of yet, or that hasn't been concretely described anywhere yet. Collected also means that most of the content has already been published somewhere, and we have copied or summarized it. Some of the texts were written specially for this booklet because we couldn't find anything already written on the subject.

In the “Action Tactics” chapter,² we deliberately included many very different options. We also received new and imaginative suggestions as we were putting it together. We believe that it can only be a good thing to constantly and creatively reflect on one's own forms of action. This includes the question of which form best conveys what we want to communicate.

That is why this booklet also aims to look at actions in their context. There are thoughts about goals, communication, and security. However,

¹*No Trace Project (N.T.P.) note: radikal* was a German magazine, first published in 1976, which included practical information on how to carry out actions. It is banned in Germany.

²*N.T.P. note:* This chapter is not included in this translation.

the thoughts on goals are very general. One of the reasons for this is that the content of our actions is geared to the social conflicts at hand, which are constantly changing. Each context sets its own priorities and needs to be discussed anew. We felt that this booklet should contain ideas that can be applied or transferred to different situations at different times. The emphasis is on practice because we wanted to be precise and show as many tactics as possible.

We haven't tested everything ourselves. However, we know some things from experience, and we have tried to verify and research everything else to the best of our abilities. For the more complicated content in the chapter, it is always necessary to do tests yourself before putting anything into practice. But you know that...

We wanted to avoid creating a hierarchy of different forms of action. Admittedly, some topics take more space here than others. This is probably because the more complicated the preparation and the higher the health risks or the intensity of repression, the longer the descriptions will need to be in order to be accurate. [...]

You may have some fundamental objections to publishing such a collection, such as that we shouldn't unnecessarily give cops or Nazis recipes for the forms of action used by the radical left, because that might make our practices more transparent. But we consider it more important to spread forms and ideas among ourselves. As we said, most of it has already been published and will already be familiar to the cops. We figured that it can be an advantage if many people in many places know and use many forms of action, because then specific practices would not be so easy to attribute. Another difficulty is that such a collection could appear to be the "ultimate collection". But it isn't intended to be, and it isn't; many things are still missing. For example, the use of the Internet is given far too little attention in this booklet. It would be interesting to think more about secure Internet access and claiming actions by email or about hacking. In our opinion, neither Internet cafes nor anonymization software are sufficient. It would also be interesting to have more information about copiers and to what extent or how copies can be traced back to specific devices, what is stored and for how long, etc.

A normal human eye takes about 20 minutes to reach maximum visual acuity in the dark. When the action begins, focus with all your senses. Try to keep reminding yourself of the plan and act accordingly. Check your communication system right at the beginning. Can everyone be seen or reached? The most important rule during the action and later on, on the way back—don't panic. Calm is a reliable companion, especially in difficult situations. If you've planned the action well, not much can happen which you're not prepared for. No matter what happens, you should always try to be deliberate and thoughtful about each of your actions. This is often difficult, especially in stressful situations.

During the action itself—and this should definitely be a significant part of your preparations—you must be extremely careful not to leave any traces behind. This includes not only fingerprints, shoeprints and car traces, but also clothing fibers, wear-marks or identifiable features on the tools you use, and any amount of genetic material that can be analyzed (from saliva on a cigarette butt to hair that has fallen out). Dispose of the tools and your "outer layer" (shoes, pants, jackets, gloves, and headgear) the same night as the action, once you are a significant distance away from the target. It's a good idea to spread out this disposal across different places, all of which can't be traced back to you (so don't use your home trash can!). If you can't do without a car, then you'll need to find a solution for its tires or even the entire car. The guiding principle is to rule out any connection between a possible trace and yourself. Even a rental car won't provide any security if the rental process can be traced back. Whether a car has to be stolen for every action or all tires have to be changed is ultimately your decision. Last but not least, it also depends on how much effort an investigation can be expected to put into tracing the car.

After the Action

It makes sense, but is not always feasible, to have a collective debrief, preferably in the days following the action. This is when memories are fresh and details can be discussed. Such a debrief should take into account the preparation phase so you can draw conclusions for next time. What worked, where did problems come up, what could have been better prepared? Were

...and Action!

On the day of the action, give yourself plenty of time to go over the plan in your mind beforehand and to prepare and assemble the necessary clothes, tools, etc. in peace and quiet. You should also give yourself more time to get to the meeting point than you anticipate actually needing. Your security depends on whether or not someone is following you and thus surveilling the action. So choose paths and routes that give you as many opportunities as possible to detect whether you are really alone. It goes without saying that mobile phones or devices with GPS functionality should not be taken along on the day of the action.

If you want to be even more secure when you head out, get help from friends and comrades. With help from two or three others, one can usually make a fairly reliable judgment about whether someone is really traveling alone. You need to prepare a route in advance that can be observed by the helpers at specific points. You need to plan in advance how to communicate the “results”: whether the person is under surveillance. Take an hour or two to think about these questions and you will certainly be able to develop a suitable plan.⁴

It's important to pay attention to surveillance cameras and the like on the way to the meeting point—you don't want the route you've put effort into securing to be reconstructed later. When it comes to clothing, you always have to find a compromise between practicality and inconspicuousness. For example, it is of little use if you are geared-out with quasi-military equipment, but are thus very suspicious in the eyes of surveillance systems. On the other hand, a fine suit or high-heeled shoes are quite a hindrance for some actions. So, you'll have to find a compromise.

At the meeting place, try to get a quick sense of the mood. Is everyone still committed to the action? Does everyone have a good feeling? When you're ready to go, compare your watches again and synchronize the time. For night-time activities, give your eyes time to adjust to the darkness.

⁴*N.T.P. note:* The practice of detecting physical surveillance with the help of a trusted third party, called *counter-surveillance*, is described in more details in Surveillance Countermeasures.^a

^a<https://notrace.how/resources/#surveillance-countermeasures>

And this brings us to the next problem—as much as we would have liked to continue to expand and collectively develop this booklet, this is not immediately possible. However, we would like to see additions, criticisms, continuations, experiences with individual actions, responses, and anything else you can think of that would contribute to a discussion on these topics within the radical left. In our opinion, the most suitable medium for this (due to its relatively widespread distribution) is the Berlin-based publication “Interim”. Until then, we wish you a lot of fun reading, all the best, great impacts in your projects, and a completely different life for all of us.

lunatics for system change

3. Action Preparation and Execution

The Steps to Success

Originally published in issue 158 of the German magazine *radikal*. The comments in square brackets are from the editors of the original PRISMA zine.

This text summarizes some things to consider when planning actions. It is aimed at smaller groups rather than mass mobilizations. However, some of the considerations can be applied to such larger actions. The text is not meant to be a step-by-step guide to action, but rather a collection of things that should be kept in mind if an action is to be successful. The points themselves are based on concrete experiences, but are kept general enough to be generally applicable...

Beforehand

A question precedes any action: what do we want to achieve, what is the goal of the action? It makes a difference whether we want to create propaganda, cause as much economic damage as possible, physically destroy something, or show solidarity with other struggles. Often we want to achieve a mixture of these different goals.

In any case, it makes sense to discuss goals as concretely as possible beforehand. Then it's easier to think about what we want to do and what we need in order to do it. No matter the action (whether you drop a banner or vandalize an office...), for these initial discussions you should choose secure places where you can be confident that you won't be overheard. Depending on the composition of your group, it may also be important to arrange to meet in a way that isn't visible to other friends, comrades and roommates, since you may not otherwise spend time with this particular group of people very often. We usually have a series of concrete targets in mind for direct action: every trip to the store, every drive through the

they can assess what stage the action is at. It is also important to set aside enough time in an earlier preparation phase to talk about fears and feelings, not only to find a "solution," but also to make each participant's actions more predictable for everyone. It's not helpful if someone acts super cool during the whole preparation and then is panicked and erratic during the action itself. The more we can collectively open up about our supposed weaknesses, the stronger the group can be when it goes into action. There is often a lot to coordinate and arrange during the preparation phase. It is often a good test of how reliable and focused the individuals in the group are. Set a clear and realistic timeline for getting everything you need. Especially when it comes to tools that leave traces, it is always a good idea not to get them from the store around the corner, but to think carefully about how this or that can be obtained without being surveilled. It's also important to pay attention to the combinations of things you buy—it may be tempting to get everything you need in one go at a hardware store, but putting a crowbar, a jerrycan and gloves in the same shopping cart can backfire. Prepare a plausible cover story for your shopping, even though no one will ask you most of the time. This will regulate the contents of your "shopping cart" and give you a sense of security.

[Keep in mind, however, that even with a good cover story, the cashier may remember you after a conspicuous purchase.]

At this stage, it's also important to consider the possibility of failure. What could happen if things go wrong? Are we taking a health risk with this action? What if the cops catch us? Who will give notice at work or pick up the kids from school? The better prepared we are for bad situations, the better we can deal with them. Depending on the tactic, there should always be agreements about who can take care of whom if something goes wrong. It's often necessary to involve friends who aren't directly involved in the action. They don't need to be privy to all the details, but there should be clear agreements about what should happen if they can't manage to get in touch with you by an agreed time.

[The individual escape routes should also be discussed together. Keep in mind that your homes may be under surveillance.]

Every step in between must be clarified and recorded in a schedule. At every stage of the action, everyone must know what needs to be done and who is communicating with whom. What tools are needed when? How will they get to where they are needed? And how will the tools be disposed of? All roles must be clearly described (driver, lookouts, people who will be directly at or in the target...) An important decision at this stage is also whether there should be some form of back-up. By this we mean a trusted person who, in the case of failure or danger, can be contacted far away from the action by phone or other suitable means to organize external support. This is not useful or necessary for all actions.

[In our opinion, telephone communication during or shortly after an action is a major security risk. We have no way of knowing if the contact's phone is being tapped. It may be possible to use a burner phone with an unused card, but even this should be carefully considered. It's probably better to arrange a meeting place beforehand.]

Plan B

It's often a good idea to think of solutions to problems that may arise. A door that cannot be opened does not necessarily mean the end of an action. If you run through several alternatives in advance, you will be able to deal with a “deviation from the plan” more quickly and easily. It's even possible to decide on a completely different goal in case there are insurmountable problems with the planned action. However, you should also decide which situations should cause the action to be aborted altogether—discuss beforehand the conditions under which it should not be continued.

Immediate Preparation

In the lead up to the action, the detailed plan should be rehearsed until everyone can confidently carry out their “role.” It's usually useful for all participants to be aware of each other's tasks so that at any given moment

city or attentive reading of the newspaper fills an imaginary list. Once you have decided what you want the action to accomplish, the next step is to select a specific target where the desired impacts can best be achieved. By narrowing down the goal, the tactic, and the specific location, you now have an initial rough plan for your action! After answering the three famous questions “what, how, and where?”, the concrete planning can begin...

[In any case, when selecting a target, care must be taken to ensure that no bystanders are endangered.]

Initial Reconnaissance

The first step should always be to familiarize yourself with the target location. Ideally, several people should take a look at the chosen location. They should use photos, drawings, and maps to describe the area to each other.

[We need to point out problems with this approach: you shouldn't have photos, drawings, etc. lying around at home. If photos and drawings cannot be avoided, they shouldn't be kept at home and should disappear as soon as possible. If photos are stored digitally, you should carefully consider where you store them, and how to completely destroy them; more on this in the last chapter. The very latest that you should destroy everything is right before the action.]

More things will be noticed with more pairs of eyes, and some things are only really noticed through the process of collective discussion. A small gate, a hidden camera, a tree adjacent to a wall... It's often these little things that later become central to the plan. At this early planning phase, it's important to develop an eye for what type of movement is typical in the surrounding area, the ways into and out of the target location, and possible escape routes. The area to take into account grows if you will be driving to the action by car³ because then you'll also need to find a good parking space and well-chosen car routes. It would be really annoying

³*N.T.P. note:* Later in the zine, a section on vehicle traces concludes that “the use of a car should [...] be avoided whenever possible.”

to get caught when leaving because of a traffic checkpoint or something similar which could have been foreseen.

A General Plan

Based on the initial reconnaissance, photos, maps, etc., you can create a general plan. This should include the routes you will take to arrive and leave which are free of security cameras, the parking options, the location of entrances on the target building, and multiple escape options. Part of this general plan is also to decide whether the action should take place during the day or at night, and how long each part of the action will take (the arrival route to the meeting point, the route from the meeting point to the target, the duration of the action, the escape routes, including alternative escape routes). You should also determine the number of people needed during this planning phase, which depends heavily on the tactics chosen and the specific conditions on the ground. How many people are needed for this specific action? How many lookouts? Is it necessary to eavesdrop on the police radio or something similar? How many cars and drivers?

Second Reconnaissance

The second reconnaissance of the target location takes place with the general plan in mind. Therefore, it should take place at a time of day similar to the time you expect the action to take place. Especially if the action is going to take place at night, it's important to know the lighting conditions and typical traffic patterns. All participants should have seen the location beforehand to get their own idea of the situation. During this second reconnaissance, the main focus should be on possible security systems and details of the terrain. For example, if you are going to scale a fence, it's important to know how it's constructed. Is it topped with barbed wire? Is it made of a material that can be easily cut? How thick is it? Is it made of individual panels that are only bolted together? Where are the screw heads located, what size are they?

After this second reconnaissance, everyone should know enough about the target to be able to decide together what tools and tactics will be needed. It is also essential to test the planned escape routes. Are there

really no surveillance cameras along the routes? Is our car really the only one that parks there, or is the spot also used by others? Is the parking location visible from a distance, or is it hidden from view? Is there enough room to turn the car around? Are any tire tracks left behind? It's often the little things that make the difference between success and failure. Another important step is to precisely measure the time it takes to get from the target to where you can get into the car. If this escape time is not fast enough, the car must either be moved closer or driven towards the people escaping so that everyone disappears quickly enough. It can be useful to agree on a meeting point after an action so that you can drive back from this meeting point together, but these routes and locations also need to be checked for suitability.

Part of this second reconnaissance should also involve thinking about where the clothes and tools should disappear to after the action is carried out. It's clear that we should at least get rid of our "outer layer" (shoes, pants, jackets, gloves and hats) as well as any tools which leave behind traces useful to the police. Otherwise, we can never know how likely it is that these items will be found and linked to us at some point.

At this stage, the most sensible means of communication must also be discussed. Can everyone always have a line of sight to each other and thus communicate with signs? Do we need walkie-talkies or other forms of remote communication? All forms of communication need to be tested on the ground to make sure it isn't too dark to see each other, or that a previously unnoticed building doesn't block radio communication...

The Action Plan

To create a detailed plan, everyone involved in the reconnaissance first goes over all the new information together. In practice, it usually makes sense to ask very specific questions about each report. Most of us aren't trained to describe a situation in detail like police officers and journalists. So it's important to ask each other questions in order to collectively acquire accurate descriptions of things. A detailed action plan begins with the meeting point of the active participants and does not end until everyone has dispersed.