

Neo-Nazi gang war fear after murder murder

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POLICE are bracing themselves for a gang war between factions of the extreme right following the conviction of two leading neo-Nazis for murder last week.

Paul David "Charlie" Sargent, 37, former leader of the neo-Nazi group Combat 18 (C18) and Martin Cross, 35, a fellow-member, were jailed for life at Chelmsford Crown Court for the murder of Christopher Castle, 28, on 10 February last year.

The killing of Castle, who acted as a go-between for rival factions in the group, was part of a struggle for control of C18, reputedly Britain's most violent right-wing body, and a lucrative neo-Nazi music scene.

He was lured to Sargent's mobile home in Harlow, Essex, and ambushed by Cross. A fatal wound to his back, penetrating his lung and heart, was described by pathologist Dr Michael Heath as one of "severe force", with a 22cm wound caused by a 20cm kitchen knife. Immediately after the attack, Cross referred to Castle as "a casualty of war".

Steven Vogel, 25, a C18 activist and England kickboxing champion, told the jury how Sargent tried to recruit him two days before the murder, to help with the attack. He said Sargent had boasted afterwards that "Chris Castle was a mug". Disgusted by this attitude, he approached the police, and his evidence proved crucial in convicting Sargent as prime instigator of the stabbing.

Castle was the victim of a power struggle between Sargent and his former right-hand man, who cannot be named for legal reasons, over control of C18. According to Det Supt Steve Reynolds, chief officer in the case, Sargent was losing credibility in the organisation which he had led for five years. He had fallen out with C18 members over control of the lucrative neo-Nazi "skinhead" music scene, the group's future strategy, and allegations by the rival faction that he was a police informer. He decided to teach them a lesson.

C18 first emerged in 1992 providing security for the British National Party (BNP), to protect its activities against increasingly successful anti-fascist disruption. By the end of the 1990s the two groups had parted company, as the BNP courted electoral respectability and became embarrassed by C18's violence.

C18 established itself as the dominant streetfighting force on the far right, drawing the bulk of its support from football hooligans in London, Essex and parts of northern England.

It promised to bring a paramilitary-style race war to the UK. Sargent and Cross were among three men convicted in March last year for publishing magazines containing bomb manuals.

One of its most successful operations was the formation of ISD Records, the first neo-Nazi record label in the UK. Over two years it produced nearly 30 illegal CDs for neo-Nazi bands, generating some pounds 200,000 profit.

More than 30,000 CDs were produced and it was money from these sales, and other C18 merchandise, that led to Sargent and his right-hand man falling out, each accusing the other of stealing ISD-generated funds.

Sargent told the court that there had also been an ideological split over the future strategy of C18. His rival favoured a smaller, less visible group which would carry out terrorist actions, while Sargent wanted an organisation that would supplant the BNP as the most prominent group on the far right.

With the murder trial out of the way, more bloodletting is almost certain. Det Supt Reynolds told the Independent on Sunday: "There is an intense rivalry between the two factions of C18 and it would be naive to think it's all ended now. There is a code of violence here which is absolutely frightening."

Eddie Stanton, 32, a Sargent loyalist based in Romford, Essex, who is part of a successor group called the National Socialist Movement (NSM), said Sargent had passed the reins of power to him. "The blood is going to flow - we're serious," he said, promising a war against the remaining C18 faction. "It's in Essex and east London now. Anyone who thinks otherwise is going to get cut - exterminated. Vengeance is a dish best eaten cold."

C18 members say it is now a smaller, more militant body. They believe the right has been losing its battle and their publication, Strikeforce, claims: "The [only] answer is an international terror/sabotage campaign."

They show grudging acceptance that a gang war will now occur. While stressing that they will not start trouble, one leader said: "If they come for us, we will hit them hard and fast. They'll be removed from the equation. They are an irrelevance."