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Ex-soldier jailed for planning arson attack on bookshop

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A former soldier has been jailed for planning an arson attack on an independent left-wing bookshop.

William Howitt, 27, wrote a note on his phone planning to carry out the attack on The Five Leaves Bookshop in Nottingham.

Howitt's plan for the attack, which was written in September 2020, included detailed steps of how to set fire to a location and then escape undetected.

One section of the plan referred to spraying a swastika and slogans such as 'white lives matter' and 'smash Marxism' on the shop.

Data recovered from Howitt's phone revealed he purchased a glass hammer and tarpaulin online – items he needed to carry out the attack – on the same evening he drafted the plan.

He also messaged a contact in an attempt to obtain a firearm but was unsuccessful.

Research of an individual connected with the bookshop was also undertaken, and screenshots of web images showing the interior and exterior of the shop were found. The arson attack was not executed.

In the months leading up to September 2020, Howitt, who was a soldier with the British Army, showed a growing anger with the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement and related activities.

Image and video files from his phone also revealed antisemitic and other extreme right-wing views.

The prosecution was able to prove that this was not a fictional idea, but a real-life plan to attack the bookshop for politically motivated reasons.

The offence came to light after Howitt was stopped at East Midlands Airport on 5 January, 2023 and handed over his phone to be reviewed by police.

He was arrested on 14 March 2023, and the glass hammer and tarpaulin were found at his home following a search by police.

He was subsequently charged under terrorism laws because the offence was designed to influence the government or a section of the public for the purpose of a political or ideological cause.

Howitt was previously found guilty of preparations of a terrorist act and today at Birmingham Crown Court he was sentenced to four years and 10 months' imprisonment.

Nick Price, Head of the CPS Special Crime and Counter Terrorism Division, said: "Howitt was someone who held entrenched racist, antisemitic, and far-right views.

"His plan to carry out the arson attack was fuelled by his anger and hatred towards those whose views were strongly opposed to his own.

“Howitt’s drafting of the plan was accompanied by the purchase of two items and an attempt to obtain a third.

“It was clear this was not a fantastical creation without intent - he planned to carry out the attack.”

Notes to editors

- William Howitt, [DOB: 4/8/96], is of West Bridgford, Nottinghamshire.
- On 16 November, he was found guilty of preparation of terrorist acts contrary to section 5 TACT 2006.

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