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Germany after the First World War – A Violent Society? Results and Implications of Recent Research on Weimar Germany

Different historiographical lines of thought are in agreement that the ubiquitous spread of political violence was one of the central structural problems of the Weimar Republic. For example, all the current forms of totalitarianism theory emphasize that an ideological and fanatical willingness with the help of paramilitary organizations to destroy the state's monopoly on violence was an essential characteristic of totalitarian movements in the 1920s, both on the left and on the right.[1] Social historians who study the history of violence generally employ – either implicitly or explicitly – a strategy underpinned by modernization theory. In this theory a tendency to work out social and political conflicts within a regulated institutional framework is seen as one of the necessary results of modernization. From this perspective the endemic spread of violence in the Weimar Republic is seen as an «anachronism.»[2] Those who employ the theoretical concept of «civil society» in their analysis of the Weimar Republic also find it easy to pronounce judgement. It is impossible to perceive in Weimar a society based on reason and the virtuous sociability of its citizens; this requires an atmosphere where violence is absent.[3] However, if one asks critically what is excluded by the concept of «civil society» the answer has to be: social reality.[4]

In spite of the different interpretations, these three approaches interpret the history of political violence within a well-ordered and clearly structured historio-

graphical narrative. Political violence is a central theme because it is one of the most important causes for the failure of the Weimar Republic. It would make sense, however, to remove the study of political violence from the inhibiting perspective of these three approaches and to ask the provocative question: «Did Weimar fail?»[5] Only from this viewpoint can one truly make evident the social and cultural dimensions of acts of violence, without being forced to place the analysis within the framework of existing political historical narratives. At present, however, we are unable to answer such a question as the necessary research has not yet been conducted. For this reason I am going to concentrate, first, on those aspects of the topic which have been the focus of recent research. In the last few years historians have sought the causes for the wave of violence after 1918 as well as for the forms and constellations of legitimating political violence in the 1920s in the First World War. In a second step I would like to discuss briefly two methodically complex aspects of the topic, for which the research is just beginning, namely the difference between the actions and the self-description of those who committed violent acts and the relationship between violence and gender.

1. Results of recent research   New research has in general emphasized that German society in the 1920s is to be interpreted primarily as a post-war society. The social mobilization for the First World War had profound and lasting effects on further developments, both structurally and culturally. The «damning inheritance of the lost war» was responsible for many forms of political and social action which led to the crisis of the Weimar Republic.[6] This recognition is especially important in regard to the wave of political violence after 1918, for it seems plausible that there is a causal relationship from the massive experience of violence in wartime to the political violence of the 1920s.

In this sense there has been frequent reference to a «brutalization» or even a «barbarization» of the generation of men who were drafted and served at the front from 1914–1918.[7] The participation of broad masses in the killing of human beings and the destruction of property in wartime had, according to this thesis,

[1] A. Wirsching, Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39. Berlin und Paris im Vergleich, Munich 1999, 11–15. – Translation by Jeffrey Verhey.

[2] D. Schumann, Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933. Kampf um die Straße und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg, Essen 2001, 11; idem, «Gewalt als Grenzüberschreitung. Überlegungen zur Sozialgeschichte der Gewalt im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert», in: Archiv für Sozialgeschichte 37 (1997), 366–386; see the critical remarks by

B. Weisbrod, «Sozialgeschichte und Gewalterfahrung im 20. Jahrhundert», in: P. Nolte et al. (ed.), Perspektiven der Gesellschaftsgeschichte, Munich 2000, 112–123.

[3] S. Reichardt, «Zivilgesellschaft und Gewalt. Einige konzeptionelle Überlegungen aus historischer Sicht», in: J. Kocka et al., Neues über Zivilgesellschaft. Aus historisch-sozialwissenschaftlichem Blickwinkel, Berlin 2001, (WZB working paper P 01-801), 45–80, 65–67.

[4] N. Luhmann, Die Politik der Gesellschaft, Frankfurt/M. 2000, 12.

[5] P. Fritzsche, «Did Weimar Fail?», in: Journal of Modern History 68 (1996), 629–656.

[6] See the pathbreaking study by R. Bessel, Germany after the First World War, Oxford 1993; idem, «Politische Gewalt und die Krise der Weimarer Republik», in: L. Niethammer et al., Bürgerliche Gesellschaft in Deutschland, Frankfurt/M. 1990, 383–395; idem, «Die Krise der Weimarer Republik als Erblast des verlorenen Krieges», in: F. Bajohr et al. (ed.), Zivilisation und Barbarei. Die widersprüchlichen Potentiale der Moderne. Detlev Peukert zum Gedenken, Hamburg 1991, 98–114.

[7] See the authoritative statement by G. L. Mosse, Gefallen für das Vaterland. Nationales Heldentum und namenloses Sterben, Stuttgart 1993, 195–222; M. Ferro, «Cultural Life in France, 1914–1918», in: A. Roshwald/R. Stites (ed.), European Culture in the Great War. The Arts, Entertainment and Propaganda, Cambridge 1999, 295–307, 298. For a critique of the «brutalization»-thesis see also J. Bourke, Dismembering the Male: Men's Bodies, Britain & the Great War, Chicago/London 1996, 22–27.

long-term consequences for psychological dispositions in the postwar period. The thin veneer of civilization was torn off through the enactment and experience of physical violence. Historians here follow a line of argumentation which Sigmund Freud developed in 1915 in order to explain human destructiveness in wartime. According to this thesis, the war set free an inborn aggressiveness, a sort of death and destruction wish, which supplied the soldiers with motivation, and which created the basis for the engagement of the soldiers in the civil war and the political violence after 1918.[8]

The thesis of a break down of cultural barriers to violence as a result of the front experience has been put forward with special emphasis and breadth in regard to German soldiers. The brutalization of the soldiers in war, and their acceptance of nationalist enemy stereotypes made these soldiers a reservoir from which right-wing paramilitary organizations and the National Socialist mass movement could recruit. According to this line of thought the personality that was shaped through the front experience was predisposed toward authoritarian politics and toward associations of male camaraderie, which were characteristic of the nationalist veterans' organizations of the 1920s. A critique of this analysis of the causes of the political violence after 1918 must take place on two levels.[9] First, one must understand the research climate in which this interpretation was formulated, the sources employed by the historians and their cultural self-understanding. In so doing one realizes that this interpretation of the front experience was developed primarily by those German historians and social scientists in American exile who were engaged after 1933 in seeking the causes for the rise of the National Socialist mass movement. They based their interpretation on a selection of autobiographical published materials drawn from soldiers of a bourgeois and academic background. The letters of the student volunteers from 1914 were very influential; they were often quoted. In these letters the soldiers stylized their own trench experiences into a radical break with the cultural tropes of interpretation and the biographical certainties before 1914. The brutalization thesis, therefore, is based on a not very representative sample, a sample, which, however, through its force and its constant repetition has found a wide circulation in the historical literature.[10]

Furthermore one must test empirically the relationship between the experience of violence at the front 1914–1918 and acts of violence in the post-war years, concentrating on different social groups, that is, on the «social-moral milieux»

(M. R. Lepsius) of German society. To which degree was there a clear relationship between the war experiences and the post-war years?[11] Until now there have only been detailed studies on the Social Democratic working class and on the rural Catholic population.[12] The outlook of Social Democratic soldiers at the front was to a large degree characterized by contradictions and ambivalence. On the one hand, there was a wide-spread disillusionment and tiredness with the war, which strengthened tendencies toward a radical critique of war and the political system of Wilhelmine Germany.[13] In this context there were voices such as that of a Hamburg soldier, who warned that workers returning from the front would bring with them the experience of physical violence and that a «Day of Reckoning» loomed:

«There will be men returning who have no fear of swords, who have been taught how to murder. The day will come when corpses will hang from lamp posts, naturally those of the police. The blood of the workers will be revenged with the blood of patriots.»[14]

On the other hand the «positive integration» of industrial workers in Wilhelminian society and the strong discipline and organization of the Social Democratic soldiers worked against radical tendencies.[15] After the armistice the vast majority of those workers organized in the SPD worked through this ambivalence by developing a profound aversion toward any further violent activities, both internally and externally. This feeling found its most visible expression in the emphatic articulation and support of the pacifist and anti-militarist position of the «No More War Movement.» Between 1921 and 1923 this movement was supported by large numbers of SPD members and Free Trade Unionists.[16] Similarly,

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8 N. Ferguson, *Der falsche Krieg. Der Erste Weltkrieg und das 20. Jahrhundert*, Stuttgart 1999, 311–335; 372–379, 329; S. Freud, «Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod (1915)», in: Idem. *Das Unbewußte, Schriften zur Psychoanalyse*, Frankfurt/M. 1963, 185–213.

9 See the references in: B. Ziemann, *Front und Heimat. Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im städtischen Bayern 1914–1923*, Essen 1997, 9–18.

10 Ibid. For the use of war letters in the representation of the front line experience in general see B. Ulrich, *Die Augenzeugen. Deutsche Feldpostbriefe in Kriegs- und Nachkriegszeit 1914–1933*, Essen 1997.

11 See the methodological reflections in: B. Ziemann, «Die Erinnerung an den Ersten Weltkrieg in den Milieukulturen der Weimarer Republik», in: Th. F. Schneider (ed.), *Kriegserlebnis und Legendenbildung. Das Bild des 'modernen' Krieges in Literatur, Theater, Photographie und Film*, vol. 1, Osnabrück 1999, 249–270, and the important essay by P. Krassnitzer, «Die Geburt des Nationalsozialismus im Schützengraben. Formen der Brutalisierung in den Autobiographien von nationalsozialistischen Frontsoldaten», in: J. Dülffer/ G. Krumeich (ed.), *Der verlorene Frieden. Politik und Kriegskultur nach 1918*, Essen 2002, 119–148.

12 For a balanced description of the ways in which German soldiers reacted to the brutalization of industrial warfare see also K. Latzel, «Die mißlungene Flucht vor dem Tod. Töten und Sterben vor und nach 1918», in: J. Duppler/G. Groß (ed.), *Kriegsende 1918. Ereignis – Wirkung – Nachwirkung*, Munich 1999, 183–199; A. Reimann, *Der Große Krieg der Sprachen. Untersuchungen zur historischen Semantik in Deutschland und England zur Zeit des Ersten Weltkriegs*, Essen 2000.

13 Cf. W. Kruse, «Krieg und Klassenheer. Zur Revolutionierung der deutschen Armee im Ersten Weltkrieg», in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 22 (1996), 530–561.

14 Anonymous letter of a German working-class soldier from August 1916, cited in: V. Ullrich, *Vom Augusterlebnis zur Novemberrevolution. Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte Hamburgs und Norddeutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1918*, Bremen 1999, 61.

15 Quote: H.-U. Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. III: 1848/49–1914, Munich 1995, 803.

16 See, with further references, B. Ziemann, «Das 'Fronterlebnis' des Ersten Weltkrieges – eine sozialhistorische Zäsur? Deutungen und Wirkungen in Deutschland und Frankreich», in: H. Mommsen (ed.), *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die europäische Nachkriegsordnung. Sozialer Wandel und Formveränderung der Politik*, Cologne 2000, 43–82, 54–65.

although a bit different, many workers worked through their war experiences in the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*, de facto a Social Democratic organization, which, with its approximately one and a half million members in the years after 1924, was the second largest veterans' organization in the Weimar Republic. The *Reichsbanner* described its aims as being against revanchist war memories, memories that glorified violence, and against the efforts of nationalistic veterans' organizations to use the front-line soldier as a symbol legitimating political acts of violence. Individual members understood the organization's goals in this manner, too.[17] The *Reichsbanner* saw itself as a force defending the Republic and aimed to give those who supported the Republic a public presence, in the form of public demonstrations and public marches, such as were characteristic of the Weimar Republic. This goal was combined with a limited militarization of the *Reichsbanner's* symbolic self-representation, and of how the *Reichsbanner* presented itself in public formations. These tendencies were limited, however, by the fact, that, with few exceptions, the *Reichsbanner* explicitly rejected the use of political violence to threaten or to intimidate a political opponent; indeed, the *Reichsbanner* viewed violence as legitimate only for self-defense.[18]

New research on how people worked through the experience of violence and the possible consequences of this for the political culture of the Weimar Republic has been conducted also for southern Bavaria (Oberbayern, Niederbayern, Bayerisch-Schwaben). Historians had long considered this area to be the most important region for the recruitment and mobilization of counter-revolutionary violence, such as, for example, manifested itself in the white terror against the Communist «Soviet» republic in Munich in 1919. This counter-revolutionary violence was itself seen as being in a line of continuity with the «total mobilization» of the World War.[19] A closer examination of the facts, however, has led to a revision of this rather clichéd conception. Among Bavarian peasants the front experience, the experience of war's destructive power, did not lead to a brutalization nor was it a deep caesurae in an individual's personal history. The psychological strain, which enacting and suffering physical violence brought with it, was taken care of through recourse to old, traditional patterns of interpretation, patterns which offered stability, such as Catholic piety, the farming family and agrarian subsistence (in a time of a grave nutrition crisis).[20] Only

17 Cf. B. Ziemann, «Republikanische Kriegserinnerung in einer polarisierten Öffentlichkeit. Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold als Veteranenverband der sozialistischen Arbeiterschaft», in: *Historische Zeitschrift* 267 (1998), 357–398. The impact of the Reichsbanner is rather neglected in M. Kittel, *Provinz zwischen Reich und Republik. Politische Mentalitäten in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/36*, Munich 2000, 274–294.

18 Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 210–212, 249–251, 267–269, 307, 323f.

19 Quotation: B. Weisbrod, «Gewalt in der Politik. Zur politischen Kultur in Deutschland zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen», in: *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 43 (1992), 391–404, 394; see H. Hillmayr, *Roter und Weisser Terror in Bayern nach 1918*, Munich 1974.

20 Cf. Ziemann, *Front*, chapters 3–5.

a small number of farmer's sons and agrarian laborers were willing to participate in acts of counter-revolutionary violence during the spring of 1919. For them a military engagement, limited in time, appeared attractive above all because of the good pay.[21]

Violent fantasies, which certainly could be found in the verbal expressions of Bavarian farmers, both male and female, lined up from 1916 until the end of the inflation in 1923 along an emotional and political axis of conflict with the urban consumers of farm products.[22] There was no offensive military organization of this conflict, and thus no realization of these violent fantasies. Up till now, most historians have interpreted the citizens' militias, a form of bourgeois self-defense, as a connection between the experience of violence in war and the «practice of violent forms of representing political interests».[23] However, empirical research on the citizen's militias in rural Bavaria as well as in the Prussian province of Saxony, an industrial region, shows that an offensive use of militias against the political left, for example, in the aftermath of the Kapp putsch in 1920, was impossible because of the defensiveness and passivity of the militia's members. Contrary to the position suggested in the earlier historical literature, the citizen's militias did not contribute to the process of helping the possessing classes in the city and the countryside to become accustomed to the use of «extra-legal violence against the left.»[24] The thesis of the older literature can be upheld only if the social and organizational practice of the militia at the local level is not taken into account; if instead, rather, the ideological self-description of the militia's leaders is given priority.[25]

Against the background of this new research a line of continuity becomes clearer, which is not from the violence experienced during the war to the political violence of the Weimar Republic, but instead runs from the *Freikorps* warriors, who in all total numbered about 250,000 men, to Weimar violence. The *Freikorps* were a radical minority in the context of the ca. 13 million German men who took part in the war. They were involved toward the end of the war in the escalation of numerous violent conflicts.[26] Participants in the anti-Bolshevist struggles in the Baltic in 1918/19 stand out as the instigators and perpetrators of atrocities in 1919 and 1920, especially the violent putting down of uprisings of organized workers. Considering the character of the struggles in the Baltic, which were ideologically

21 Ziemann, *Front*, 395–399.

22 Cf. Ziemann, *Front*, 308–356; K. Tenfelde, «Stadt und Land in Krisenzeiten. München und das Münchener Umland zwischen Revolution und Inflation 1918–1923», in: W. Hardtwig/idem (ed.), *Soziale Räume in der Urbanisierung*, Munich 1990, 37–57.

23 Weisbrod, *Gewalt*, 393; J. M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany*, Bloomington/London 1977, 55ff.; H. Mommsen, *Aufstieg und Untergang der Republik von Weimar, 1918–1933*, Berlin 1998, 59.

24 Ziemann, *Front*, 400–433; Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 70–83, quotation 36f.

25 Cf. Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg* 300–304, 309–313.

26 See generally: Bessel, *Germany*, 256–259; Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg* 130–133.

charged and radicalized through the use of enemy stereotypes, it makes sense to surmise a causal relationship here.[27]

On the whole the newer research tends to revise in a significant way an older thesis about a direct mass psychological or mental causal relationship between the experience of violence in war and acts of violence committed in the post-war years. This new research relies, first, on an analysis of the historical context in which this argument was made, and, second, on empirical studies on the war experiences of ordinary soldiers. The German historiography on World War I is here following trends begun in the French history of mentalities, as well as in sections of the Anglo-Saxon historical community. A previous tendency toward analyzing processes of mental change solely on the evidence provided by literary texts is being replaced by an empirical and thorough analysis of wider semantic and cultural paradigms.[28] By concentrating on the transmission of continuities in the life-worlds of large social groups, however, this cultural history research is, however, to some degree, engaging in a social historical reductionism, in that the cultural representation on the one hand is related to a constant social-structural substrate, regardless of whether or not this substrate is characterized as a «milieu» or as a «life-world.»

A picture which deviates from this social-historical emphasis on continuity is produced when one analyzes the social processes of mobilization for the war in the context of the symbolic forms of representation of politics. Within such a perspective the fundamental crisis of bourgeois self-representation in the Weimar Republic – regardless of some early warnings in the cultural crisis of the Wilhelminian bourgeoisie – becomes clear. This crisis began already at the onset of the war in August 1914, that has for a long time been interpreted primarily as a moment of enthusiastic mass support for war.

This newer research fundamentally revises the topology of enthusiasm, by suggesting a different understanding of the changes in political representation, which were an essential feature of the «August experiences». From this perspective it is less important whether or not the broad population was actually enthusiastic. What we are most interested in is the fact that the attitudes and reactions of the population had already become the central interest of a mass media public sphere,

27 Cf. Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 90–95, 135–137; V. G. Liulevicius, *War Land on the Eastern Front. Culture, National Identity, and German Occupation in World War I*, Cambridge 2000. It is often neglected that Klaus Theweleit in his important but not very systematic psychoanalytical interpretation of the «Freikorps» explicitly denied the relevance of the front-line-experience. Theweleit argued that the violent character of the «Freikorps» was formed already during their military education in the Wilhelmine cadet schools. K. Theweleit, *Männerphantasien*, vol. II, Reinbek 1980, 344, 351. See, for example, Bourke, *Dismembering*, 22.

28 Cf. J-J. Becker et al (ed.), *Guerre et cultures 1914–1918*, Paris 1994; A. Lipp, «Diskurs und Praxis – Militärgeschichte als Kulturgeschichte», in: Th. Kühne/B. Ziemann (ed.), *Was ist Militärgeschichte?*, Paderborn 2000, 211–227.

which observed and recorded this political ritual of the transition of a nation into a state of aggression.[29]

Using this populist model for legitimating nationalist politics in August 1914 one can interpret the essential ways of representing the war experience as «virtualization,» «dramatization» and «actualization». These three modes can be understood as a semantic reaction to the need to integrate the destructiveness of war into the political language of the nation, thereby giving a meaning to the war as solace and comfort to individuals who had experienced great loss.[30] Researchers in the history of mentalities often formulate hypotheses of a methodological nature, that is, that in such a form of argumentation there is as a rule a discrepancy between the national semantics and the individual meanings given to the war and that this needs to be taken into account.[31] But none the less it is true that the First World War deepened already existing divisions in the political semantics of Germany and therefore marks a turning-point. Through the suggestive invocation of national unity the project of the semantic exclusion of an internal enemy was moved forward; the turning of the enemy into a devil also helped along the dramatization of politics engendered by the war. This actualization of the hopes for redemption favored a political vocabulary which hoped – through a decisionist and violent pattern of action – to fulfill expectations which had not been met.[32]

Research into political violence in the Weimar Republic has profited not only from developments in cultural history and the history of mentalities, but also from a new theoretical and methodological orientation in the sociology of violence. Building on the path-breaking study of Heinrich Popitz on the «Phenomena of Power», current research has begun to criticize as useless and circular previous sociological strategies of research into the causes of violence. Representatives of the new sociological research on violence have criticized as reductionist the inference of violence from political, social and economic crisis, when these crises are seen as causes behind or above the violence itself. In a phenomenology of violence the violent act itself is the focus of study, as a form of social activity in itself, an experience in itself. The internal dynamic of the specific bodiliness of violent acts, the absence often of any direct cause, or the way in which the violent act was done in itself and for itself – this internal dynamic is brought forward in

29 See the pathbreaking study by J. Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914. Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany*, Cambridge 2000; August 1914 is a crucial moment for the genealogy of modern populist politics in: P. Fritzsche, *Germans into Nazis*, Cambridge (Mass.)/London 1998.

30 B. Weisbrod, «Die Politik der Repräsentation. Das Erbe des Ersten Weltkrieges und der Formwandel der Politik in Europa», in: Mommsen, *Der Erste Weltkrieg*, 13–41.

31 See exemplary the interpretation of female languages of victimization and sacrifice in: B. Ziemann, «Geschlechterbeziehungen in deutschen Feldpostbriefen des Ersten Weltkrieges», in: Ch. Hämmerle/E. Saurer (ed.), *Briefkulturen und ihr Geschlecht. Zur Geschichte der privaten Korrespondenz vom 16. Jahrhundert bis heute*, Vienna 2003.

32 See, in comparison with developments in Great Britain: Weisbrod, *Repräsentation*; Reimann, *Krieg der Sprachen*, 167–278.

this perspective, as well as highlighting how it may be the violence itself which breaks down boundaries.[33]

This change of perspective in the research on the sociology of violence has direct consequences for historians' analytical and rhetorical strategies concerning violence. It appears problematic to try and explain acts of violence primarily on the basis of a correlation with the social-structural data of the region being studied and the actors involved, or to try and explain it as a function of the ideological power to shape thought that is a part of political organizations.[34] Success is more likely to be found in an analytical strategy which uses information of this sort as a precondition for a study of the logic of social action, logic which violent actors could themselves perceive. This implies at the same time that in the analysis and the description of the causes the accent has to be placed on the careful and exact description of acts of violence that actually took place, in order to come as close as possible to understanding what the actors actually meant, and to understand their repetitive patterns of action. Clifford Geertz's concept of «thick description» is useful here, although this terminology in the research on violence is often capable of being misunderstood and is increasingly used in an inflationary manner.[35] In this context it should be mentioned that many older works have accomplished something exemplary in their analytically exact description of acts of violence, without any reference to Geertz.[36]

The practical carrying out of such a research program necessarily depends on detailed studies of the logic of action in local and regional case studies – it would be too much work otherwise. Such research has recently been undertaken for the Prussian province of Saxony, which was a traditional stronghold of the socialist working class movement, where the Communist Party was able to profit considerably from the political division and radicalization of the working class during the war. After the «selective civil war» from 1919 to 1921 political discussions were characterized foremost by the struggle over political symbols and the attempts to occupy public space. The symbolic stealing of the respective symbols of identity picked up on a pattern of conflict between nationalist and socialist camps, such as characterized the phase immediately after the end of the war. In November 1918 revolutionary workers and soldiers tore the epaulets off the uniforms of many officers. Cockades and flags of the imperial army were

33 Cf. H. Popitz, *Phänomene der Macht*, ²Tübingen 1992, 43–78; B. Nedelmann, «Gewaltsoziologie am Scheideweg. Die Auseinandersetzungen in der gegenwärtigen und Wege der zukünftigen Gewaltforschung», in: T. von Trotha (ed.), *Soziologie der Gewalt*, Opladen/Wiesbaden 1997, 59–85.

34 For a – still valuable – example of this line of argument see G. Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik. Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Un-ruhen in Österreich 1918–1934*, Munich 1976.

35 Th. Sokoll, «Kulturanthropologie und Historische Sozialwissenschaft», in: Th. Mergel/Th. Welskopp (ed.), *Geschichte zwischen Kultur und Gesellschaft*, Munich 1997, 233–272, 243–249.

36 E. Lucas, *Märzrevolution im Ruhrgebiet. Vom Generalstreik gegen den Militärputsch zum bewaffneten Arbeiteraufstand März-April 1920*, vol.III, Frankfurt/M. 1970–1978, 354–383.

destroyed and replaced by red flags.[37] In the following years the conflict concerned above all the flags of the republic and the Prussian-German monarchy or the symbols of the paramilitary associations and the political parties. These struggles over symbols were at the center of public battles between rival crowds. Only seldom were men killed or injured in such battles, and when this occurred it was a direct result of the specific dynamics of action among the people present.[38] Such events can be characterized as «violence» only if one views the destruction of symbols and the intentional injuring of the human body as being on the same level. The new sociology of violence, however, picking up on the work of Heinrich Popitz, has taken a position explicitly against such an equation. This equation does not pay enough attention to the special sensitivity of the human body for being injured («Verletzungsoffenheit»), which is especially important for social action and socialization in general. Accordingly, there is a huge difference between an act of violence which leads to a lessening of social participation by injuring the material interests of the victim, and one which leads to physical pain and which thus attacks the social integrity of the person in a fundamental way.[39]

Since 1924 these struggles over symbols were of importance for the endemic diffusion and later radicalization of the political violence only inasmuch as they hardened the lines of tension between the socialist and the bourgeois-national camp. Of central importance here was the fact that the national paramilitary associations claimed the street as their space for political action; this space had before 1914 been occupied by the socialist working class movement. This offensive application of «street politics» (Thomas Lindenberger) was carried forward above all by a veterans' organization, *Stahlhelm. Bund der Frontsoldaten*, founded in 1918. Their activities provoked a reaction from the left, above all from the KPD and their self-defense organization, the *Rote Frontkämpferbund*. This cemented a pattern of conflict, one of whose normal elements included acts of violence.[40] A thorough radicalization and escalation of this pattern, however, remained something reserved for the National Socialist Storm Troopers, the SA. For this fascist fighting group taking violent possession of the streets in the areas in which the political opponent lived was not just a means to achieving a political goal. The fascist cult of violence was a goal in itself. It was the expression of a life-style which served to

37 Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 45–144, 47, 51; Kruse, *Krieg*, 560.

38 Cf. Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 143–202, esp. 151–158, 164–167. For a local example of a fast radicalization of socialist workers and the bourgeois camp in the aftermath of the First World War, which led to violent fighting and atrocities in the Kapp-Putsch 1920, see H. Matthiesen, «Zwei Radikalisierungen – Bürgertum und Arbeiterschaft in Gotha 1918–1923», in: *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 21 (1995), 32–62.

39 Cf. Popitz, *Phänomene*, 44; Nedelmann, *Gewaltsoziologie*.

40 Cf. Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 203–358, esp. 228–244; E. Rosenhaft, «Links gleich rechts? Militante Straßengewalt um 1930», in: Th. Lindenberger/A. Lüdtke (ed.), *Physische Gewalt. Studien zur Geschichte der Neuzeit*, Frankfurt 1995, 238–275; Th. Lindenberger, *Straßenpolitik. Zur Sozialgeschichte der öffentlichen Ordnung in Berlin 1900 bis 1914*, Bonn 1995.

uphold through acts of destruction the sense of belonging in the group, and which put forward a propagandistic image of oneself which had nothing to do with the social patterns of bourgeois civil life. In their violent activism the SA gave birth to a completely new style of politics, the fighting organization (*Kampfbund*).[41]

This thesis stands in opposition to arguments which were developed from an analysis of the special case of Berlin, according to which fascist mobilization – regardless of the roots of the folkish ideology, which went back into the nineteenth century – is to be understood as a «reaction» to the primary Communist language of violence and to the civil war, which were «perceived as a significant threat.»[42] It has been questioned, and with good reason, whether it makes sense to apply this thesis concerning Berlin, a KPD stronghold, to areas outside Berlin. For, importantly, at least half of the violent actions of the SA formations were directed not against the radical KPD but against the Republic's self-defense organization, the *Reichsbanner*.[43]

2. Actions and self-descriptions   The new research on violence in Germany after 1918 aims primarily to study empirically the significance of violence in the war experiences and to reconstruct the social logic of acts of violence. The years 1914–1918 are thus systematically a part of the «pre»-history of the Weimar Republic. At the same time this sort of research has changed the measuring stick used to answer the question whether or not Germany after the First World War is to be characterized as an especially violent society. Older studies on the history of the political and ideological crisis of liberal thought during these years, and a new analysis of totalitarianism as a syndrome which can primarily be defined by its ideology, tend – even in an international comparative perspective, to answer «yes.»[44] Works characterized by a perspective informed by social history and the history of experience set a different accent; their answer is «yes, but.» They emphasize on the one hand the ability of certain segments of society to neutralize or cushion at least partly those dislocations and tensions in their life-world which were caused by the First World War. This perspective emphasizes the scope of possible actions for action which existed for the political actors in their

41 S. Reichardt, «Formen faschistischer Gewalt. Faschistische Kampfbünde in Italien und Deutschland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg. Eine typologische Deutung ihrer Gewaltpropaganda während der Bewegungsphase des Faschismus», in: Sociologus 51 (2001), 56–88; idem, Faschistische Kampfbünde. Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen SA, Cologne 2002.

42 Cf. Wirsching, Vom Weltkrieg, esp. 124–135, 299–330, 455–460, 506–525, quotation: 515.

43 S. Reichardt, Review of: A. Wirsching, «Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg» (1999), in: Beiträge zur Geschichte des Nationalsozialismus 17 (2001), 233–237; Schumann, Politische Gewalt, 63. For a local radicalization of the conflict between SA and Reichsbanner see L.D. Stokes, «Der Fall Radler. Zum Tod eines nationalsozialistischen «Märtyrers» und die Folgen in Eutin. 1931–1933», in: E. Hoffmann/P. Wolf (ed.), «Wir bauen das Reich.» Aufstieg und erste Herrschaftsjahre des Nationalsozialismus in Schleswig-Holstein, Neumünster 1983, 41–72.

44 Cf. Wirsching, Vom Weltkrieg.

organizations and in the state. A close analysis of the concrete events shows that an ideological willingness to participate in violence did not always have to lead to actual violent activities, at least not at full strength. The Weimar Republic was a society characterized by violence. But this violence did not mean that the Republic was doomed to failure from the start. There were many opportunities to rein in the violence and to control it.[45]

These divergencies in the interpretation of post-war German society have also to be understood in terms of regional differences. Empirical research has concentrated on the study of specific regions. The picture we are developing is gradually changing, depending on whether or not one investigates Berlin, which was charged with conflicts, or the not so violent rural Oberbayern. The different accentuation is based as well on different methodological premises, which, however, are seldom stated clearly. Here it is worth noting that there was a difference between the practice of violence and a self-description characterized by violence, at least among some groups and individuals. These differences can be shown quite clearly by the example of the Communist «social rebel» Karl Plättner. Since 1920 Plättner was a member of the left-radical splinter party KAPD. After the failure of the communist «March Action» in 1921 he became more widely known as the leader of a group which robbed banks, post offices and factory cash registers, with the intention of giving the money to workers. The fighting rhetoric with which Plättner himself described his revolutionary activity was characterized by an excessive willingness to use violence. «Our struggle will, if it is not possible to do it any other way, accept corpses,» wrote Plätter in 1919. The actual robberies, in which the group used revolvers and hand grenades to threaten and to intimidate, were different. The group did not commit acts of violence against people, and, indeed, the group had agreed beforehand that they would flee rather than actually use their weapons.[46]

The example of the Communist Plättner, whose revolutionary determination was tremendous and whose violent rhetoric was extremely radical, demonstrates that one needs to differentiate in one's analysis between the violent rhetoric and the actual practice of violence. The verbal readiness to injure the political opponent did not lead automatically to carrying out the semantic threat of violence. This does not, however, mean that a violent self-description is unimportant for the historio-graphical understanding of violence, just the opposite. The traditions and forms of the semantic codification of violence are of crucial importance for a differentiation between legal and illegal, between morally legitimate or illegitimate violence. The legitimization of state violence, especially as embodied in the challenge both verbally and in practice put forward by the political actors both on the right and the

45 Cf. Ziemann, From; Schumann, Politische Gewalt, esp. 359–368.

46 Cf. V. Ullrich, Der ruhelose Rebell. Karl Plättner 1893–1945: Eine Biographie, Munich 2000, quotation 74, 129.

left, was a part of the «everyday business» of the political system not only during the Weimar Republic.[47] The political right in Germany could refer back to a national tradition – elaborated since the nineteenth century – of violent self-description, in which the use of violence against internal – meaning above all, socialist – and external enemies, had a high value.[48] The bourgeois nationalist public sphere of the Weimar Republic was increasingly able to accept the illegal violence of the fascist SA, or at least to tolerate it, because they perceived the Communist victims as being in opposition to the highest political value of the day, the *Volksgemeinschaft*.[49] And these semantic attributions had themselves an impact on the way in which the state's own apparatus of violence responded to the violent «street politics.»

We need to differentiate, secondly, between the experience of violence and the discourse on violence. We can define as experience those events which can be put into the relevance structures of social knowledge, such as individuals develop in the course of their socialization. These structures are based on traditions of lifeworlds, and every change of experience implies therefore a certain break in the plausibility of the life-world. Discourses in contrast regulate the way in which one can talk publicly about certain things, which set of themes or problems appear to be relevant for public discussion, and in which form.[50] This methodological differentiation is important for an appropriate understanding of the symbolic and ideological forms with which the mass of street fighters from the KPD and the NSDAP participated in violence, and how they referred back to their action. This difference is important for our understanding of the social practices concerning the «experience» of the soldier at the front in the first World War. Toward the end of the Weimar Republic the members of the SA and the *Rote Frontkämpferbund* were mostly too young to have actually fought at the front; rather, they had experienced the war as young students. It is therefore methodologically problematic to interpret the political mentality of the KPD followers, which was directed toward a revolutionary civil war, back to the «trauma» of the First World War, so long as the content and the methodological status of this concept is not more closely defined.[51] In terms of content, one presupposes a socialization characterized by deprivation and by the

47 Luhmann, *Politik*, 192–197.
48 Cf. J. Vogel, *Nationen im Gleichschritt. Der Kult der ‹Nation in Waffen› in Deutschland und Frankreich 1871–1914.* Göttingen 1997; Th. Kühne, «Das Deutsche Kaiserreich 1871–1918 und seine politische Kultur: Demokratisierung, Segmentierung, Militarisierung», in: *Neue Politische Literatur* 43 (1998), 206–263.
49 M. Trauttig, *Im Kampf um Glauben und Kirche. Eine Studie über Gewaltakzeptanz und Krisenmentalität der württembergischen Protestanten zwischen 1918 und 1933.* Leinfelden-Echterdingen

1999, 21–85; D. Schumann, «Einheitssehnsucht und Gewaltakzeptanz. Politische Grundpositionen des deutschen Bürgertums nach 1918» (mit vergleichenden Überlegungen zu den britischen middle classes) in: Mommsen, *Weltkrieg*, 83–105.
50 For a conceptualization of this difference see K. Canning, «Feminist History after the Linguistic Turn: Historizing Discourse and Experience», in: *Signs* 19 (1994), 368–404.
51 Wirsching, *Vom Weltkrieg*, 36, 45f., 128, 419–422.

absence of a father – this is seen for the Communist street fighters of the Great Depression as a part of the process of «uprooting.» Such a line of argumentation is based primarily on a social-cultural correlation in the form of a generational argument, and is hardly an empirical description of the process of socialization.[52] If one thinks about the glorification of the «front experience,» especially among the very young followers of the KPD and the SPD, it appears that the effect of the World War lay, however, actually in the reformulation and the decisionist coming to a head of radical discourse both on the right and on the left. In this discourse the significance of the «individuals» and the importance of his necessary sacrifice for the community was newly codified.[53] The dominance of this discourse in the Weimar public sphere had a significant impact on the possibility of articulating publicly the personal history of an «unheroic» war experience. This can be shown, for example, by examining the history of Fritz Einert from Thuringia, a member of the *Reichsbanner*. In 1926 Einert wrote an autobiographical manuscript, in which he criticized the nationalistic war myths on the basis of his own war experiences. Einert sent his text to one of the members of parliament who was investigating the «Causes of the 1918 German Collapse.» He included, however, a note that the manuscript was not to be published, for in this case he feared negative economic and social results following a publication.[54]

3. Gender and violence   Although the research here is just beginning, the study of the importance of gender for the explanation of violence in Weimar is likely to be of special interest. This topic gains its relevance not only from the fact that almost all the people who participated in violent political acts were men. The street violence of the Weimar Republic is also to be interpreted in the context of male virtues such as toughness, determination, and fitness for military service, which were propagated and idealized, albeit with different accentuation, in all the paramilitary associations, regardless of the political affiliation.[55] There can be no doubt that such «male» virtues had a profound influence on the group culture of the veterans' and paramilitary associations. It is very hard, however, on the basis of the present research, to judge to what degree the masculine group images of oneself had an impact on actual violent activity. Furthermore, it should not be overlooked that the emphasis on the «tough side» of

52 See the references in: A. Wirsching, *Die Weimarer Republik. Politik und Gesellschaft*, Munich 2000, 106.
53 For this argument see Ziemann, «Fronterlebnis», in: Idem, *Erinnerung*. The importance of the «cult of the fallen soldiers» for the discursive integration of the Nazi-movement is brillantly analyzed in: S. Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden. Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945*, Vierow 1996.
54 Cf. B. Ziemann, «Gedanken eines Reichsbannermannes auf Grund von Erlebnissen und Erfahrungen.» Politische Kultur, Flaggensymbolik und Kriegserinnerung in Schmalkalden 1926. Dokumentation, in: *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Thüringische Geschichte* 53 (1999), 201–232.
55 Cf. Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 254–269.

the ideal of manliness always represented only one aspect of male socialization in the group culture of «camaraderie.» In the armies and paramilitary associations of the twentieth century there always existed alongside the toughness a «soft,» «feminine» side of male camaraderie, which emphasized the feeling of belonging and the benefits of the affection felt within the group. The function of these attributions was in part to make bearable the contradiction between the practice of violence and civilization's norm of remaining peaceful.[56]

One also has to recognize that the use of physical, especially sexual violence against women was a specific form of violence. Although we have a good mono-graph on sexual violence in Imperial Germany, 1870–1914, this topic has not yet been looked at for the Weimar Republic.[57] It would be important to examine sexual violence in connection with the gender relations after the First World War. The relevance of this form of violence is especially understandable if one accepts the view that violence against women has to be analyzed as a form of political violence, politics here being defined as the conflict-ridden struggle about the relation between social order and male/female role models. The significance of the murder and rape of women is thus not limited to the immediate struggle between the people directly involved. Rather, it refers much more to an underlying crisis in gender relations as a result of the mobilization of men and women for the First World War.

On the basis of the present state of research we can not yet evaluate the extent, the form and the results of this crisis.[58] It appears, however, to be at any rate plausible that the crisis of political representation after the First World War, which was described above, is also and perhaps above all to be interpreted as a crisis of the representation of the male body.[59] The degree to which this crisis was rooted not only in the vulnerability of the male body through wartime violence, but also in the aspirations of women to social and political participation, needs further research.[60]

56 Th. Kühne, «Imaginierte Weiblichkeit und na-tionalsozialistischer Krieg. Geschlechterverwir-rung und Geschlechterordnung 1918–1945», in: K. Hagemann/St. Schüler-Springorum (ed.), Hei-mat-Front. Militär, Krieg und Geschlechterverhält-nisse im Zeitalter der Weltkriege, Frankfurt/M./ New York 2002, 237–357.

57 Cf. T. Hommen, Sittlichkeitsverbrechen: Sexuelle Gewalt im Kaiserreich, Frankfurt/M. 1999; see the remarks in: R. J. Evans, «Geschichte, Psycho-logie und die Geschlechterbeziehungen in der Vergangenheit», in: Geschichte und Gesellschaft 7 (1981), 590–613, 606. For an analysis of the importance of violence against women in Wei-mar painting see: M. M. Tatar, Lustmord, Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany, Princeton/N.J. 1995; K. Hoffmann-Curtius, «Frauenmord als künstlerisches Thema der Moderne», in: W.-R. Kemper et al. (ed.), Serienmord, Hamburg 2002.

58 As a brilliant introduction in recent research see Ch. Hämmerle, «Von den Geschlechtern der Kriege und des Militärs: Forschungseinblicke und Bemerkungen zu einer neuen Debatte», in: Kühne/Ziemann (ed.), Militärgeschichte, 229–262.

59 Cf. S. Maß, «Das Trauma des weißen Mannes. Afrikanische Kolonialsoldaten in propagandisti-schen Texten, 1914–1923», in: L' Homme Z.F.G. 12,1 (2001), 11–33; see also Bourke, Dismembe-ring, R.W. Whalen, Bitter Wounds. German Victims of the Great War, 1914–1939, Ithaca/London 1984, 37–57.

60 As an important, but highly speculative starting point for future research see E. Domansky, «Mili-tarization and Reproduction in World War I Ger-many», in: G. Eley (ed.), Society, Culture and the State in Germany 1870–1930, Ann Arbor/Mich. 1996, 427–463.

Deutschland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg – eine gewalttätige Gesellschaft ? Ergebnisse und Konsequenzen der jüngsten Forschungen zur Weimarer Republik

In den letzten zehn Jahren hat sich die historische Forschung zu den Formen von Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik neu orientiert. Dies geht erstens auf eine kritische Neubewertung der «Brutalisierungsthesen» zurück, die einen unmittelbaren Kausal-zusammenhang zwischen der Kriegserfahrung und gewaltsamem Verhalten nach 1918 hergestellt hat. Der zweite Grund ist in der Rezeption jüngster Tendenzen der Gewaltsoziologie zu sehen, in der eine «Phänomenologie der Gewalt» (Popitz) die Wichtigkeit der «dichten Beschreibung» von Akten physischer Gewalt betont hat. Drittens kommt einem geschlechtergeschichtlichen Zugriff für die weitere Erfor-schung von Gewalt in Deutschland nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg eine zentrale Rolle zu. Insgesamt haben die genannten Faktoren dazu geführt, politische Gewalt in einen breiteren Kontext zu stellen und das Bild einer von Gewalt erfüllten Wei-marer Republik zu differenzieren.

L'Allemagne après la Première Guerre Mondiale –
Une société violente ? Résultats et conséquences des dernières recherches sur la République de Weimar.

Au cours des dix dernières années, la recherche historique sur les formes de la vio-lence pendant la République de Weimar a pris une nouvelle orientation. La première raison de ce changement est le nouveau jugement critique de la thèse de «brutali-sation» qui créa un lien direct de causalité entre les expériences de la guerre et les comportements violents après 1918. La deuxième raison vient de l'acceptation des nouvelles tendances de la sociologie de la violence dans lesquelles une «phénomé-nologie de la violence» (Popitz) insiste sur l'importance de la «description dense» des actes de violence physique. Troisièmement, la façon de voir le rôle historique selon une place centrale dans la future recherche sur la violence en Allemagne après la Première Guerre mondiale. D'une façon générale, les faits cités ont conduits à situer la violence politique dans un contexte plus large et à différencier l'image d'une société violente pendant la République.

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