



## Introduction

*Jochen Böhler, Ota Konrád, and Rudolf Kučera*

For a very long time, World War I in Central and Eastern Europe had been widely ignored in historiography. Although the Eastern Front witnessed the same period of heavy fighting as did the Western, and although significant parts of land there were under foreign occupation for years, knowledge of these events and their impact on the troops engaged there and on the local population was sparse. During the 1920s and 1930s, enthusiasm over the newly won national independence had dominated the discourse in the states between Russia and Germany. After World War II, when these very countries ended up in the sphere of influence of the Soviet Union, the Cold War created an atmosphere where what had happened in the years before 1918 seemed of only minor importance.<sup>1</sup> With the turn of the millennium, things began to change (Baczkowski and Ruszala 2016; Borodziej and Górny 2014; Gumz 2009; Kučera 2016b; Liulevicius 2000; Mędrzecki 2000; Watson 2014), but there was still little notion of what happened immediately after the Great War, when imperial rule had ended but the region had not yet come to a rest. On the contrary, it witnessed armed conflicts and ethnic violence for years, with anti-Jewish excesses and the emergence of proto-fascist paramilitary groups being only the most visible transnational phenomenon (Hagen 2018; Hanebrink 2018; Gerwarth 2008).

Within the past decade or so, many seminal works have started to fill this void successfully. The notion that the armistices of 1918 did not constitute a watershed between armed conflict and peace has since been well established, and this not only goes for Central and Eastern Europe but also includes the experiences of countries such as Great Britain, Italy, France, or even beyond (Barth 2003; Prusin 2005; Wilson 2010; Klabjan 2011; Gerwarth and Horne 2012; Gerwarth and Manela 2014; Newman 2015; Jones 2016; Borodziej and Górny 2018; Millington 2018).<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, where Central, Eastern, and Southeastern Europe is concerned, physical violence has been treated so far rather as an isolated phenomenon, widely detached from the unfinished de-

mobilization and the ongoing conflicts connected with the building of new states.

The victorious narratives of many newly created states tended to downplay violence as one of the shaping factors of their emergence and concentrated instead on forging legitimizing narratives based on the notions of civility, peace, and a much more successful postwar reconstruction overall than those states that were deemed to have lost the war. This notion has also partly been adopted by the relevant historiography, which sometimes tends to draw a dividing line between the states that were defeated in the war and those that were treated as war winners. While the defeated states are seen as those suffering from a war that “failed to end” (Gerwarth 2016) long into the interwar period, many of the winning states have been described as enjoying a faster recovery and postwar stabilization, paving the way for subsequent economic prosperity and social stability. However, most recent works suggest that postwar reconstruction could have also been problematic in some of the victorious states that were forced to cope with similar problems stemming from the war, which challenged the unproblematic victorious narratives (Newman 2010; Frank and Szabó 2015; Kučera 2016b; Beneš 2017; Egry 2017; Böhler 2018; Konrád 2018). That is why treating defeated states such as Germany, Austria, or Hungary separately from the war winners of the region such as Romania, Czechoslovakia, Poland, or Yugoslavia might obscure fundamental issues that can become apparent in a mutual comparison. Therefore, this volume has brought together historians of Hungary, Austria, and Germany together with those dealing with Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Poland to ask a common set of questions and ponder the similarities and differences regarding not only the break-up of European empires around 1918 but also the tools to master it and build the pillars of the new order.

It is a commonplace in contemporary historiography that to cross the boundaries of a nation-centered historiography and venture onto transnational and comparative ground has proved fruitful for generating fresh perspectives on European as well as non-European history. That is also true for the particular field of World War I and postwar violence. Among the first comparative works, Sven Reichardt’s book on the practices of Italian Fascist paramilitary commandos *Squadre d’Azione* and German *Sturmabteilung* was probably the most prominent contribution that showed how the concept of violence as a legitimate tool of political communication of both organizations was closely associated with the prevailing idea of masculinity (2009).<sup>3</sup> The scope was further widened by studies of paramilitary violence treated as a transnational phenomenon that appeared in practically all the defeated states of Central and East-Central Europe and emerged from the specific “culture of defeat” in the aftermath of World War I. Paramilitary violence here

was interpreted as a phenomenon brought about by the collective shock over the military defeat, weak statehood, and threat of communist revolutions (Schumann 2003; Kershaw 2005; Horne 2005; Gerwarth 2008; Gerwarth and Horne 2011).

However, as already mentioned, the categories of “culture of defeat” and “culture of victory” have analytical limits. The various and complex postwar period cannot be described as having such clear path-dependencies between war defeat and violence. The contributions of this book address forms of demobilization in victorious and defeated states of East-Central Europe, examine public violence and its state and nonstate actors, and investigate the role this violence played in the public discourse about the postwar reconstruction. From a cultural history angle, the volume addresses the aftermath of the Great War, that is, the various ways that individual East-Central European societies set off from the war into the postwar period. In this context, violence played an important role. What appeared crucial were specific and various frameworks in which individual postwar societies developed their specific “settings of mind” and learned to handle and understand violent experiences.

The first two chapters discuss state collapse and violent collectives, situational aspects of violence as well as a longer predisposition for the emergence and formation of postwar paramilitary violence from the perspective of the perpetrators. Mathias Voigtman deals with a classic case of “culture of defeat,” i.e. Germany after the war. He focuses on the so-called *Baltikumer*, members of the German paramilitary groups that got involved in the fighting in the Baltics in 1919. Under the circumstances of the new type of warfare, characterized by small, mostly independent combat groups, many of the members of these groups made an experience with a brutal culture of violence, where the collective performance of violence became a crucial socialization factor. The violent experiences complicated the demobilization, and the reintegration of these men and their postwar social networks and memory threatened the postwar democratic political order in Germany.

While in Germany the concept of the culture of defeat appears to be an appropriate analytical framework for understanding paramilitary violence and its impact on the postwar society, in the case of Ukraine, as described by Christopher Gilley, it does not explain much. While Ukraine underwent a stormy political development during the war and in its immediate aftermath, defeat could turn into victory and vice versa depending on specific regional conditions and actors. The power vacuum shaped the specific spaces of violence, in which the individual actors of paramilitary violence, the Ukrainian warlords, became prominent. Gilley analyzes their changing self-representations and identities in the revolution and in the postrevolutionary phase, which were closely connected to the rhetoric and use of violence.

Béla Bodó's study of anti-Semitic and sexual violence, deals with another "space of violence," i.e. postwar Hungary, particularly during the period of the White Terror after the defeat of the short-lived communist regime of Béla Kun. Bodó stresses the importance of the specific situation of violence, which can escalate even in brutal, performative violence in which the perpetrators, victims, and bystanding public are mutually connected. According to Bodó, "violent artists" were central in escalating and shaping particular violent situations. However, at the same time, he stresses the role of the long-term ideological paradigms and cultural settings, like anti-Semitism, conservative notions about women, and how men from the middle classes used to be educated and socialized.

All these chapters stress the importance of the space and situation in which violence occurred. The dissolution of an old order, the specific power vacuum, and a subsequent unstable political situation leading into a civil war made it possible to create specific spaces and situations of violence in which otherwise unthinkable fantasies could emerge. These fantasies then shaped the performance of violence that drew upon long traditions of nationalism, anti-Semitism, and antifeminism, but at the same time also created something new: new collectives as well as individual identities. These experiences, further disseminated by social networks of the perpetrators and their memory, gave birth to new narratives that were threatening the postwar order.

The following chapters of the book are dedicated to violence as a part of transnational discourses and its use in transnational political and literary disputes. Emily Gioielli deals with the same case as Béla Bodó does—with the humiliation and torture of Mrs. Hamburger. However, Gioielli is interested in the "second life" of this case of brutal sexual violence. She analyzes the ways how the case of Mrs. Hamburger became one of the most known cases of postwar violence in interwar Europe. She is especially interested in partly different accents and meanings that were ascribed to this case by various actors who made public the case of Mrs. Hamburger (British Labour Party, Jewish organizations, and Mrs. Hamburger herself). After World War I, when women called for emancipation and equal participation in public life, violence against them became a sensitive issue and also played a symbolic function. Analyzing the medialization of this specific case of sexual violence, Gioielli stresses the importance of violence for the emerging postwar transnational public and the active role of women and women's organizations in this process.

Winson Chu also concentrates on the process of medialization of postwar violence. He deals with the journalism of Joseph Roth who informed the (defeated) German readership about violence in postwar Poland, i.e. one of the countries that, contrary to Germany, benefited from the results of the war. This situation, and specifically Roth's nostalgia for the former Austro-Hungarian Empire, framed his interpretation of postwar violence in "East-

ern Europe.” Once again, physical violence played a crucial role in casting Roth’s plots and embedded his narratives with clear notions of culture and barbarism, thus translating the intricate situation in the East into a coherent narrative that was understandable for his German readers. Similarly to the case of Mrs. Hamburger’s incident, here violence also proved to be a central means in transnational media discourse about the immediate aftermath of the Great War.

The chapters by Leidinger and Górný also deal with the representations and reflections of violence, this time, however, in the framework of scholarly communities and discourses. Hannes Leidinger and Maciej Górný analyze the expert discourses that strived to understand the violence that emerged or intensified during the war and in some cases shaped local societies well into the 1920s and 1930s. Leidinger analyzes the statistics of suicide and the respective sociological scholarship that tried to understand it. While Leidinger insists that the war did not mean any significant rupture in the understanding of this kind of violence, Górný, on the other hand, underlines the importance of the changing of war and postwar contexts for the psychiatric knowledge and its treatment of the “war psychosis.” During the war, the German-speaking psychiatry ethnicized the “war psychosis” as an example of the “weak nerves.” After the war, psychiatrists in Czechoslovakia and Poland developed a concept of the “strong nerves” of men who—thanks to their victory—knew what they fought for and will fight for again in the future. The changing cultural framework, stresses Górný, became decisive for the reflection of violence and construction of the respective expert discourses.

To sum up, these chapters are interested in the medialization of violence in postwar Europe and its reflections in expert knowledge. Violence is not only about immediate practice aiming at harming or killing enemy bodies but is also used at the same time as a symbol to mobilize postwar societies or to make sense of the problematic postwar reconstruction. Although emerging in specific local contexts and frameworks, some of the chapters show how it became a transnational phenomenon shaping far more than just the agency and experience of the immediate perpetrators and victims.

The last chapters by Matějka and Parfene continue in the analysis of the states, which mainly benefited from the new postwar order and looks on different strategies of taming the violent potential stemming from the war and postwar demobilization. The case of the activities of the YMCA in postwar Czechoslovakia shows the precondition of a successful de-escalation of (ethnic as well as social) tensions in the postwar Czechoslovak society. The geostrategic importance of the new Czechoslovakia for Western European countries and the United States combined with a widespread feeling of war victory and valuable war sacrifice made it possible for the YMCA to successfully support the emerging democratic regime by de-escalating the postwar violence.

The last chapter illustrates, however, the limits of such an integrative culture of victory. In the case study of the national football team in postwar Romania, Cătălin Parfene analyzes an attempt to integrate even the “defeated” ethnic groups of the postwar Romania in a new, victorious Romanian state. However, as the author underlines, this attempt was eventually not successful. The narrative of victory, one can conclude, was tied to a specific nation, which made it challenging to represent the whole multiethnic society of the (re)newed states in central and eastern Europe after the war. As the Romanian case study shows, there were cultures of victory and defeat in one state simultaneously, with far-reaching consequences for the escalation of the potential of violent rhetoric and even practice in the future.

Altogether, the chapters of this book show that postwar violence was a complex phenomenon with various forms, meanings, understandings, and impacts on postwar societies. Looking on the societies in the aftermath of the Great War can unravel lots of differences, but also some surprising similarities. War victory indeed provided a better starting point for taming the violent potential but was by no means a guarantee of a peaceful exit from the imperial frame. By appropriating the victorious narratives, the new “state nations” of what Pieter Judson (2016: 442–52) calls “little Empires” of interwar Central and East-Central Europe tried to monopolize the interpretation of the past. This automatically generated new or deepened already existing conflicts between the ethnic majority and ethnic minorities within these new states.

This book also shows that violence was not important only for local contexts and actors but that it could easily become a transnational tool of communication and representation. As the cases of the YMCA in Czechoslovakia and the Romanian national football team show, this transnational aspect can be used to highlight both the chances and limits of transnationalism for postwar reconstruction.

For a long time overlooked by scholarship, the transition from war to peace in the wake of the Great War was a crucial phase in European history that significantly shaped the interwar years. Paramilitary milieus with antistate agendas continued to exist and destabilize the postwar order, while initially democratic governments that had emerged out of a turmoil of war, civil war, and revolution soon tended to lean toward authoritarianism (Barth 2016; Leonhard 2018, Tooze 2014). The processes at work were multilayered and entangled at the same time, and thus defy a monocausal explanation. The feeling of defeat and victory changed depending on time, space, and actors.

In some cases, both could coexist even at the same time and place. The analysis of various and changeable postwar frameworks and “setting of minds” brought by this book helps to understand the individual perspective of historical actors, specific forms of violence, its emergence, and its de-escalation in specific situations and regions in the shadows of the Great War.

**Jochen Böhrer** is acting chair holder of Eastern European history at Friedrich-Schiller University Jena. In 2017 he served as a visiting professor at Sorbonne University in Paris. He has been a senior research fellow at the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena (2010–2019) and the German Historical Institute in Warsaw (2000–2010). His latest contributions to the topic of this volume include *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), and (with Włodzimierz Borodziej and Joachim von Puttkamer) *Dimensionen der Gewalt. Ostmitteleuropa zwischen Weltkrieg und Bürgerkrieg 1918–1921* (Berlin: Metropol, 2020).

**Ota Konrád** is an associate professor of modern history at Charles University in Prague. In 2018 he served as a visiting professor at the University of Regensburg. He has worked on topics dealing with the history of the humanities, history of foreign policy, and cultural history of violence in East-Central Europe. Recently, he published *Geisteswissenschaften im Umbruch. Die Fächer Geschichte, Germanistik und Slawistik an der Deutschen Universität in Prag 1918–1945* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2020), and (together with Rudolf Kučera) *Out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Reconstruction of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Prague: Academia Publishers, 2018). Currently, he is working on a project supported by the Humboldt Foundation about collective violence as a tool for reshaping collective identities at the end of World War II in Europe, mainly in Czechoslovakia.

**Rudolf Kučera** is director of the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences and teaches as an associate professor at Charles University in Prague. He was a junior fellow at the Freiburg Institute for Advanced Studies (2009–2010) and senior fellow at the Imre Kertész Kolleg in Jena (2013–2014). In 2019 he served as a visiting professor at the University of Vienna. He is working on the cultural history of modern wars, labor, and violence. Recently, he published *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2016; paperback 2019), and (together with Ota Konrád) *Out of the Apocalypse: Physical Violence in the Fall and Reconstruction of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Prague: Academia Publishers, 2018).

## Notes

1. Nevertheless, the following were published in this period: Holzer and Molenda (1967); Pichlík, Křížek, and Vávra, (1967); Křížek (1968); Stone (1975); Jindra (1984).
2. See also Eichenberg and Newman (2010) and the following contributions in this special issue.
3. See also Goodfellow (2013) or Bauerkämper and Rossolinski-Liebe (2017).

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# *The Baltikumer*

## Collective Violence and German Paramilitaries after 1918

*Mathias Voigtmann*

### Introduction

We march to the sound of a muffled drum,  
How dark the visage, how gloomy the song.  
O Germany, our hearts are so heavy,  
For we are the last of the old army.

We have stood our ground through every disaster,  
The enemy has never made us waver.  
We have held fast in an age without faith,  
To our flag, our leaders, our true German oath.

Now home calls us to foreign command.  
We must go back, though danger's at hand,  
We conquered our fear, and will not fall,  
Yet this is the hardest duty of all.<sup>1</sup>

This “Kampflied der Baltikumer” (Battle song of the Baltic troops) is good indicator of the stylized self-image of the German Army units that fought in the Baltic countries after World War I. It also refers to the immediate aftereffects of that war on Eastern Europe; that is, its effects on relationships and events in the immediate postwar years. For many people, especially in Eastern Europe, the war did not end in 1918. In many places, a return to peace and normality was impossible. Death, murder, expulsion, and deportation continued to be part of everyday life. The period between 1917 and 1923 was marked by a variety of conflicts and wars that overlapped and merged into one another. Not

infrequently, the tactics of the Great War were reintroduced, and many people felt that they were living through a single vast experience of violence. This entire period was shaped by revolutionary wars, ethnic cleansing and pogroms, wars of independence, civil wars, state and state-building wars, and guerrilla warfare. One characteristic of the age, cutting across geography and society, was extreme, violent paramilitary activity in the *shatterzones of empires* (Liu-levicius 2002; Wróbel 2003; Eichenberg and Newman 2010; Gatrell 2010; Prusin 2010; Bódo 2011; Gerwarth and Horne 2013: 7; Böhler 2014; Gerwarth and Mandela 2014; Sapper and Weichsel 2014; Bartov and Weitz 2016).

One extremely radical example of a paramilitary (Dupuy 1993: 2104–7; Moran and Moran 2002; Gerwarth and Horne 2013: 8) was the German “Free Corps” units, known as the *Baltikumer*, which were primarily deployed in Latvia in 1919. This chapter seeks to shed light upon the actors and combatants in the conflict in the Baltics. It explains the motivations expressed by those fighting there and how they correlated with the self-image of the various German units.<sup>2</sup> These *Gewaltgemeinschaften* (communities of violence) can be understood as social groups or networks that were characterized by physical violence that was applied or threatened in a particular *Gewaltraum* (area of violence). Besides the motivations and self-perceptions of the combatants, this chapter analyzes the importance of joint acts of violence, that is, how joint military actions reinforced group identity and cohesion. Furthermore, this chapter considers the extent to which it was possible for German paramilitaries to reenter normal civilian life in the Weimar Republic after returning home to Germany. Did a specific culture of remembrance or a particular narrative develop from the historical depiction of their period of active combat? Another question pursued here is the nature of the long-term consequences of the fighting for both the individuals involved and the political system they found themselves in after the war.

## Recruitment and Motivation of the *Baltikumer*

The *Baltikumer*, a word that very quickly entered the literary canon of the Weimar Republic, are Germans who fought under various banners and in various constellations against their enemies in 1918, but mainly in 1919. They primarily engaged in action in Latvia against the Bolsheviks of Russia, but later also against Latvians and Estonians in the context of civil war.<sup>3</sup> Originally intended as security units for retreating German troops in World War I, the German volunteer units, and the units of the Baltic armies that fought alongside them, soon reinterpreted their role (Koch 2002: 123). They took the offensive, with Riga as their main objective (Volkman 1970; Hehn 1977; Purkl 1997; Stopinski 1997; Knigge 2003; Bleiere 2008). At the beginning of the “Baltic

Project,” the Allies were keen that German troops should be deployed against the Bolsheviks. As justification, they relied on Article XII of the Armistice agreement, which, roughly summarized, envisaged a German obligation to occupy and defend the Baltics for as long as the Allies deemed necessary.<sup>4</sup>

One important incentive for the *Baltikumer*, especially for volunteer units from Germany, was an alleged promise by the Latvian government to provide them with land for settlement purposes. This “settlement promise” was never expressed in an official document or contractually agreed upon, but the German government referred to it continually, creating one of the most important incentives for recruiting volunteers. It had its origin in an agreement between the Latvian government and the German state signed on 29 December 1918. To simplify matters, that agreement set forth terms for the support of German troops against further advance of the Bolsheviks and granted German soldiers Latvian citizenship after four weeks of service.

Ultimately, this evoked a “Baltic fever,” to quote a later German defense minister, Gustav Noske (1920: 177). Recruited by the Anwerbestelle Baltensland (Baltic Recruitment Office),<sup>5</sup> which was specially created for the purpose, and influenced by posters on advertising kiosks and in shop windows and by large numbers of newspaper advertisements, thousands of volunteers set off for Latvia and the Baltic in the spring of 1919, some with completely unrealistic expectations (Zobel 1934: 74; Sammartino 2010: 49–52).<sup>6</sup> For the most part, the recruits were demobilized World War I officers, Imperial Army cadets who had enjoyed a military education but had not been able to participate actively in the hostilities of the Great War, and nationalist university and high school students (Schulze 1969: 47–54).

Aside from the purported incentive of land for settlement, the recruits’ motives and reasons for joining the paramilitary structures were not the same for all those involved. To the contrary: insofar as one can rely on the personal documents and somewhat untrustworthy reports retrospectively composed after the conflict, their individual motives were extremely diverse.<sup>7</sup> Even where ideological convictions can be detected as an initial motivation, other reasons were always a factor as well, and the recruits’ willingness to be deployed cannot be explained without them. A desire for adventure played a role. So did many recruits’ feeling that they had been born too late to serve in World War I and that this new combat mission could overcome the ignominy of defeat in World War I. Thus, defeat had a certain mobilizing force for some combatants (Schivelbusch 2003). For example, Erich Balla, who was a battalion commander in the Iron Division, the most famous military formation of the German Free Corps in the Baltics, wrote,

What a relief from dull hopelessness and the hand of fate it was to him, when one day he read in the newspaper that German troops in the Baltic were still fighting

Bolshevism and that volunteers with front-line experience were being sought. Once again, there was a task; there was a goal worth living for! (Balla 1932: 16)

For men like Balla, deployment in the Baltic was a kind of salvation, enabling them to do their patriotic duty as soldiers. For many, the East was a sort of stylized, mythical place of fulfilment. A volunteer soldier, Franz Nord, wrote,

Everywhere in Germany where men refused to give in to defeat, an indefinite hope of the East began to grow. The first who dared to think of the coming kingdom knew with a lively instinct that the outcome of the war had utterly destroyed all Germany's ties to the West, and that a courageous fellow dared to ride into the broad swathe between us and Asia, which for us Germans seems covered in a mystical glow, and that at every crossroads, this ride offered unimagined prospects and exhilarating opportunities. . . . And it was this feeling and insight which made the Baltic seem like a magical eye in the midst of the storm of the first post-war years, a new German field of influence, which could replace that lost home . . . (Nord 1929: 63)

Financial incentives and the prospect of new career options should not be neglected as motivations. All the volunteers in the Baltic Corps received an extra allowance in addition to their normal pay. Last but not least, they had an opportunity to live out romanticized fantasies of military life and to actively prove themselves in battle. Ernst von Salomon, the unofficial chronicler of this younger generation of paramilitaries, seemed somewhat fatalistic when he wrote,

But there still probably had to be something, something that couldn't be calculated or weighed up—in the end, an idea? O God, these big words! I didn't have any ideas, unless you count the cheap slogans of our warfare in the Baltic as something like that. No, we marched without an idea, without a purpose, without a goal. And that was good, that was three times as good. Hell, finally here was something that didn't offer easy answers, which couldn't be estimated or weighed. (Salomon 1929: 106)

Evidence that the Baltic Project also appealed to people who acted out of base motives is found in the records of Walter von Rohrscheidt, a subaltern in Latvia: "These old soldiers encountered throngs of rootless folk of all kinds, adventurers, work-shy, highly morally questionable elements, whom they primarily wanted to restore to health out there" (Rohrscheidt 1938: 29; Voigtmann 2015: 122–40).

These short extracts illustrate reasons why so many volunteers could be found for the Baltic Project. In retrospect, their perceptions of their own motivations were often polarized between extremes. Edgar von Schmidt-Pauli, one of the chroniclers of the volunteer corps and later a convinced National Socialist, fell in line with the times when he referred to the volunteer combat-

ants as the “best Germans” (Schmidt-Pauli 1936: 30). In sharp contrast, the historian Boris Barth saw them as “the criminal residue of the Imperial Army” (Barth 2003: 261).

### The *Baltikumer* as a Special Paramilitary *Gewaltgemeinschaft*

As a result of aggressive recruitment and the high expectations of the volunteers, Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz, the commander of all units in the Baltics, had about fourteen thousand men at his disposal by March 1919 (Schulze 1969: 134). As an offensive against the Bolsheviks began in March, it rapidly became clear what type of war was being waged in the Baltics, although its nature was subject to transformation and change. On balance, the conflict was a running battle of a “wild and permissive nature,” as former soldier Franz Nord wrote in retrospect (Nord 1929: 63). It had guerrilla-war-like features, to which the small, independently operating units of the volunteer corps seemed particularly suited. The German units initially saw the Bolsheviks as their main opponents.<sup>8</sup>

It is important to state at this point that events in the Baltics cannot be viewed in isolation from the civil war and revolution in Russia. Fear of Bolshevism was a mobilizing factor, and there were direct contacts with the enemy Red Army and links to the White units (Gerwarth and Horne 2013). For the German volunteers, the Red Army was not the only enemy, however. The local rural and urban communities also posed a potential threat.<sup>9</sup> Although only a certain proportion of the local population sympathized with the Bolsheviks, the German troops in the Baltics encountered latent opposition everywhere. This led to a very particular dynamic of violence.<sup>10</sup> Looting, violent appropriation, and confiscations frequently occurred in engagements in various localities, at the initiative of individual subgroups. They often forced entry into homes and “lived a few hours *on the house*,” or “off the land,”<sup>11</sup> to use the common terminology of the time. “The soldiers descend on the houses like a pack of wolves, often forcing their way in. It cannot be pleasant to experience such stormy quartering,”<sup>12</sup> as the personal notes of one soldier put it.

The members of the *Gewaltgemeinschaft* generally cultivated an elitist and interventionist understanding of violence, seeing themselves as the violent vanguard of the anti-Bolshevist effort. This inevitably led them to seek to transform the society they had infiltrated and terrorized. However, they lapsed into violent crime, opportunistic vandalism, and other acts of violence, which became characteristic of the *Gewaltgemeinschaft*.

In his essay “The Nature of Violence as a Problem of Sociology,” Jan Philipp Reemtsma identified the following types of violence, which can also be identified in the Baltic conflict:

1. “Localized violence”: In this case, the opponent, i.e. the other body, is simply an obstacle to be overcome.
2. “Raptive violence”: This is understood as the physical penetration of a body, for example in sexual violence, particularly rape.
3. “Autotelic violence”: This refers to the absolute, deliberately planned destruction of a body. (Reemtsma 2008: 52–54; Voigtmann 2015: 127)

These three types of violence occurred and continually recurred in various proportions in Latvia. Apart from its decidedly physical component, violence always has a symbolic message as well (Popitz 1986: 73; Lindenberger 1995: 7; Trotha 1997). When the bodies of murdered Bolsheviks were put on public display, the act of violence was a message addressed to a third party, the survivors.<sup>13</sup>

Combat was experienced as a period of biographical compression, in which one’s virility could be experienced most intensively. This is seen in the memoirs written for the *Baltische Landeswehr* (Baltic Territorial Army) in 1968 by Nikolaus von Grote, a former adjutant of a battalion fighting in the Baltics:

“I have never lived so intensely as I did in the *Landeswehr*,” wrote a former member of the shock troops from a distant continent. We agree with this statement, not because we were young in 1918–1920, but because later on, we were rarely as engaged as we were in those years. This impacted on the spirit of the troops, creating a strong community. They benefited from the fact that concepts like patriotism, fidelity, obedience, and comradeship were not questioned. This only happened later, because these virtues were abused. Our camaraderie was spontaneous. . . .<sup>14</sup>

The following must be stated regarding the experience of community and group cohesion described by von Grote. For the *Baltikumer*, involvement in a *Gewaltgemeinschaft* was often loaded with intense emotion. In this situation, many of them found themselves in an “emotional tunnel of violence” (Collins 2011: 544–57). It is possible to trace a particular dynamic of brutalization, which was very much shaped by external conditions. A defining feature of the *Baltikumers*’ particular group identity is undoubtedly found in collective violence, whether in dealing with the enemy or internally in the group’s self-discipline. In some subunits, violence had a dual function: it was both a social element and the defining guiding principle (Voigtmann 2015: 130).

The experience of joint struggle and the real danger of death were intensely unifying factors, but they also presupposed that the group members could rely on each other unconditionally. If one member of the group did not act as was deemed necessary for survival in the extreme conditions of running battle, the majority of the group unleashed a rapid and self-adjusting cleansing process: “It was certainly possible that one of the crowd opposed the iron laws of the clan. In this case the company convened into a brief field court, and

after the mutineer was crushed, the Hamburg group moved on, singing their pirate song with angry scorn for technicalities” (Salomon 1930: 81). Besides its internal disciplinary function, collective violence always had an external confirmatory effect, excluding others. One former member of the volunteer corps remembers it like this: “It was dangerous to even step on one of their toes; anyone careless immediately had the whole pack of them at his throat” (Salomon 1930: 80). Or, according to Felix Schnell, “Collective violence is a very effective means of saying ‘we’” (Salomon 1930: 80).

The collective violence and the spatial experience associated with it gradually changed the self-image of a large proportion of the fighting units. In Latvia in 1919, “different roles in German history” were not simply “tested and exchanged for others,” as Vejas Liulevicius puts it, but indeed the whole “stage [seemed] like a huge, violent costume party” (Liulevicius 2002: 289).

In hindsight, the majority of the former combatants saw themselves as mercenaries rather than regular soldiers (Salomon 1929: 113; Balla 1932; Theweleit 2009). This self-image can be repeatedly deduced from the memoirs of various combatants. As the aforementioned Ernst von Salomon wrote,

The stragglers invested the spent, derogatory word with new content, and proudly called themselves mercenaries and their wars mercenary. . . . This was most visible in the gradual change in their cohesion. The formations of the Great War, defined by the experience and tradition of Old Prussian rule, increasingly lost their character as ordered members of a large, purposeful military organization. They became smaller and smaller groupings, under a lesser flag, in their own jealously guarded sections, which did not observe the general law of the whole army, but the will of a revered leader, whose name they all wore on their sleeves. And since these small . . . squads, with their swashbuckling actions, were constantly facing a majority which dominated in terms of both numbers and equipment, they were soon shaped by the need to defeat the greater mass with greater force. These military personnel became war technicians who learned to master any weapon, any terrain and any conditions. Attack became the most effective weapon of a minority, and gained newly pointed significance. (Salomon 1929: 113)

The Baltic Project came to an unofficial end when the last German units crossed the border back into Germany in December 1919. An order from Berlin to leave the Baltics immediately had previously been ignored by some of the troops, which equated to open mutiny and defection from the German state. This did not, however, alter the fact that German volunteer units were increasingly at a military disadvantage. Their rearguard actions were characterized by extremely brutal acts, applying the scorched earth principle, using petrol to raze whole parks and orchards to the ground for pure pleasure. When they withdrew from certain villages, strategically important buildings such as provisions offices and barracks were set on fire.<sup>15</sup>

According to Jörg Baberowski and Felix Schnell, it is also possible to discuss Latvia and the people fighting there in terms of a particular *Gewaltraum* (i.e. a space where violence is practiced). In this context, the *Gewaltraum* in the Baltics can be identified on both the real geographical level and the social level. It was defined by the idea that the use of physical force is the form of social action that ensures the best chance of success in fulfilling the group's objectives and interests. The violence the group commits thus keeps it together, creating a spiral of violence.

Another characteristic of the *Gewaltraum* was the existence of networks in which locals and nonlocals shared a very specific distribution of tasks. In the case of the combat units in Latvia, nonlocals—primarily the German volunteer formations—had the external contacts necessary to access the logistical and financial resources essential for the use of violence. Nonlocal Baltic troops also fulfilled a leadership function. Around these violent groups there were other groups of actors who were not actual members of the *Gewaltgemeinschaft* but who contributed the detailed knowledge of local conditions that was required.

## Transformation Processes in the *Gewaltgemeinschaften* and the Formation of a Particular Culture of Remembrance

In *Krieg im Frieden* (War in peace) Robert Gerwarth compares the lines of communication in the violent counterrevolutionary subculture of postwar Europe to a spider's web.<sup>16</sup> Such networks and mutual influences continued to exist in the Weimar Republic, based on parallels in the personal life stories of their members (Voitgmann 2013: 135).

Historical research has focused on the violent careers and generation-specific experience of violence in the post-World War I period for some time now. Bruno Thoß notes that, for the generations born before 1900, “the context of the two world wars characterized the age and was the real sign of the times experienced” (Thoß 2002: 7). According to Joachim Tauber, the experience of violence in World War I meant that many men “were no longer able or willing to return to civilian society” (Tauber 2008: 7; Haslinger and Petronis 2013: 346). It is possible in that context to identify forms of processing, traditions, the perpetuation of violence, and the consequences of each on remembrance practices and group cohesion after the demobilization of *Gewaltgemeinschaften* in the Baltic. The transitions in this typology may of course be fluid and not at all static.<sup>17</sup>

Some returnees made a clear and complete break with this episode in their biographies and with their experience of violence. They abandoned their temporary communities forever and cut themselves off from all contact with their

former comrades. This meant a full withdrawal into normal private life. Naturally, their stories were lost and it soon became difficult to uncover them.

Some other former combatants also made a decision to distance themselves from acts of violence. However, this group suffered from an inability to completely detach themselves from war, violence, the volunteer corps, and paramilitarism. Through a wide variety of artistic expression, these chroniclers of violence sought to process their experiences and convey them to those who had stayed at home and to successive generations. They could glorify and affirm them, but they could also criticize and condemn them.<sup>18</sup> One example is the biographical and literary career of the German poet and writer Karl Christian Müller, also known as Teut or Teut Ansolt.

Müller, like so many of the *Baltikumer* born at the turn of the century, served primarily in the volunteer corps in Western Latvia, “in Liebermann’s volunteer battalion.” In his early poems, he showed disappointment over the opportunity he had missed to fight in the Great War and the burden of being born too late. His personal memoirs of his time in the volunteer corps, however, show that his romantic expectations of heroic combat soon proved illusory. His diary entries are characterized by deprivation, hardship, the troops’ poor supplies of materiel, and the negative experiences of fighting.<sup>19</sup>

There was yet another, entirely different type of life after the return from the Baltics. Some soldiers returned to Germany shaped by uncompromising offensive warfare, conducted on their own terms, which reflected virtually unconditional and absolute activism and an extreme readiness to take the initiative. They did not appear willing to adapt to the structures and relationships of normal civilian life. A variety of memoirs, diary entries and personal correspondence make it clear that the specific experience of the culture of violence in Latvia had a lasting effect on these men.<sup>20</sup> Some of them brought what they had lived, learned, and internalized in the Baltics back to Germany, a process that can be regarded as the migration or transfer of violence. In the early 1920s, this type of man had hardly any opportunities to join the political leadership. He could join in on violent actions, such as the various attempted coups d’état, but he could not organize or lead them himself. Ernst von Salomon was one of these veterans of violence. In Salomon’s case, his socialization to violence in the Baltic was reflected in arms smuggling, acts of sabotage, and political assassinations in the early 1920s. For example, Salomon was indirectly involved in the assassination of Walther Rathenau by closely observing him to find out details of his daily routine.<sup>21</sup>

The various actions by former volunteer combatants and their associations were organized and led by men who can best be described as “networkers of violence.” When the *Baltikumer* returned to Germany, the government was keen to completely disband the existing formations.<sup>22</sup> In order to resist the effects of demobilization and to keep in touch, many former soldiers got involved in

the *Arbeits- und Siedlungsdienst* (Employment and Settlement Service) and other organizations.<sup>23</sup> These men were exemplified by Gerhard Roßbach and the organizations he led. With his volunteer corps, Roßbach, who was born in 1893 and had served as an infantry lieutenant in World War I, made a significant contribution to the reasonably orderly and successful withdrawal of the *Baltikumer* from Latvia in late 1919.

Back in Germany, Roßbach's storm-trooper formations were officially disbanded on 28 January 1920, but they continued to exist as described above. Roßbach publicly praised the service of his now camouflaged corps in newspaper advertisements. He and his men offered their services to big landowners in Mecklenburg, Pomerania, and Silesia, where they acted as a type of territorial protection force, marked by a readiness to use expert violence.<sup>24</sup> The following eyewitness account describes the group's actions:

The *Roßbacher* (Roßbach's men) exerted terrible pressure on the farm workers. When there are strikes the *Roßbacher* come (with weapons of course) immediately to help the landowner beat up the workers and work as scabs, receiving cigarettes, wine, ham sandwiches and monetary compensation for their labor. In the East Wismar area alone, approximately 500 *Roßbacher* work on the estates. Each Roßbach man has weapons—some have firearms, others daggers or a truncheon—which he has to keep hidden in his house. Each property has a squad, depending on the size, and each squad has a leader provided by the local leadership. The internal operations are entirely military. When an officer appears, the cry *attention!* rings out through the barracks and the whole company clicks their heels together, until the order *at ease* is given. (Gumbel 1979: 89–90)

Besides these extremely violent, radical acts that maintained the group identity of the Baltic troops after active hostilities were over, there were also more moderate, civilian attempts to maintain some kind of organization. Many former combatants organized themselves into various fellowships. One of the largest of these was the Kameradschaft ehemaliger Baltikumer- und Freikorpskämpfer (Fellowship of Former Baltic Troops and Volunteer Combatants). These fellowships spread all over Germany, especially in Berlin and the surrounding region, where a disproportionate number of former Baltic troops were organized. Regular fellowship evenings usually took place once a month, at which the veterans gave talks that were based on their common experiences. These talks often glorified exceptional episodes and the “heroic deeds” of the Baltic veterans (*Der Reiter gen Osten* 7, 1936: 15).

It is striking that certain events took on prominence. A culture of remembrance developed in which select battles were emphasized and placed at the heart of common memory. One such central event was the conquest, or “liberation,” of Riga on 22 May 1919. Riga is a constantly recurring theme in various memoirs. As Hamilkar von Foelkersahm wrote in a letter to a comrade

in 1972, “Old army comrades refer to those days as the time of their lives, and this is especially true of the 22nd of May; for me, too, this day will always be a highlight of my life.”<sup>25</sup>

Numerous volunteer corps magazines were also devoted to the common memory, glorification, and justification of the volunteer corps’ actions both in service and in postwar Germany. The bestselling, highest-circulation of these was published monthly from 1930 until December 1943, *Der Reiter gen Osten* (The Eastward Rider) or *RgO*. Recurrent themes in the publication were the Feme murders committed by far-rightists against their political opponents, German paramilitaries’ engagement in Upper Silesia, the Baltic Project, and disparaging criticism of the Weimar Republic. Edited by the Bund der Freunde Schlageters (League of Friends of Schlageter) or Bund Schlageter e.V., the *RgO* maintained traditions and commemorated past events in order to preserve them for posterity.<sup>26</sup>

Yet the magazine also served different purposes. It was a means of communication, a newsletter, and an organizational aid to help the numerous former Baltic troops stay in touch and maintain their community structures. The magazine published information about the current addresses of former members of the volunteer corps in the Baltic. The *RgO* also announced their marriages and deaths and fielded enquiries as to their current whereabouts and spheres of activity. Thus, the *RgO* fulfilled a dual function: on the one hand it acted as a repository of memory, significantly contributing to the creation of the myth surrounding the volunteer corps, and on the other, it was instrumental in maintaining and consolidating group structures.

## Conclusion

The creation of large, well-developed paramilitary organizations with expansive social networks and radical subversive ideas was particularly exemplified by the *Baltikumer*. This was a trend that spanned entire societies and areas of Europe after World War I. Paramilitary *Gewaltgemeinschaften* occupied a special position in the postimperial fault zone of Latvia in 1919, where the *Baltikumer* sought to fill a power vacuum and achieve a new balance of power. The temporary weakening of the state monopoly on violence also created particular conditions and markets for violence. It enabled the formation of structures that, on the one hand, combined nonlocals with local actors who had knowledge of the area, with a very specific allocation of tasks. On the other hand, there were characteristics of an outsourcing strategy based on a division of labor, which resembled other forms of state violence.

The individual combatants’ motives for engagement in the Baltic were extremely complex and by no means equally important to all involved. In addi-

tion to the prospect of settlement land promoted by the German government, they were driven by ideological convictions and a thirst for adventure, enhanced by the feeling that they had been born too late for combat in World War I. Last but not least, the opportunity to live out a fantasy of a romanticized military life and to prove themselves in battle was decisive to their enlistment.

Since the majority of the Baltic troops had an elitist and interventionist understanding of violence, there was a certain tendency to autonomy, accompanied by an intent to transform the society that they had infiltrated and terrorized. This tendency led to violent crimes, opportunistic vandalism, and other violent acts, which were a particular pattern of behavior of the *Gewaltgemeinschaften*. Collective violence was one of the defining characteristics of some units. Violence fulfilled a dual function, both as a social element and as a guiding principle. The majority of the former combatants viewed themselves in hindsight as having been mercenaries with violent tendencies rather than regular soldiers. Their group understanding and the gradual removal of common social norms under the extreme conditions of guerilla warfare had a direct impact on their psyches. Interpersonal dynamics and interdependencies made it almost impossible for men to leave their formations and also made it easier for radicalized individuals to quickly gain influence over the groups.

After the paramilitary forces returned from the Baltic, some contributed to the destabilization of the Weimar Republic and played a role in the radicalization of public life. The paramilitary *Gewaltgemeinschaften* that had operated in the Baltics were maintained in a new form by some ex-combatants. While some Baltic troopers were ready to return to normal civilian life, others felt they were neither able nor willing to do so. The networks formed in the Baltic continued to function in peacetime, and their activities were a case of transfer of violence.

The former combatants retained a special sense of community even after the period of active violence in the Baltics was over. Former combatants met in their own specially established fellowships and remembered the past, focusing on certain select events that dominated and shaped their discourse of remembrance, such as the “liberation” of Riga. Autobiographical sketches and the collection of various experiences and life stories also served to put their authors in control of the uncertainty in their own biographies, allowing them to distance themselves from their former selves and relocate themselves in history.

Gunther Mai was one of the first to assert that the interwar period in Europe was marked “by a bewildering *accumulation of configurations that favored violence*” (Mai 2001: 13). The *Baltikumers*’ involvement in the *Gewaltgemeinschaften* and paramilitary networks created structures and opportunities to realize their new vision of order and community, drawing on a continuation of violence after World War I. Consequently, paramilitary associations in East-Central Europe between the two world wars were not just a transitional phe-

nomenon but also a particularly violent vanguard, which had significant impact on both existing and newly forming political and social orders. It is no coincidence that in the German case, they provided a fertile recruiting ground for the personnel of the Gestapo, SA, and SS.

**Mathias Voigtmann** studied European history and European cultural history at the Technical University Chemnitz and at the European University Viadrina Frankfurt (Oder). In 2011 he finished his master's thesis "Literature as Historical Source—New Insights to Soviet Camps after Reading Varlam Šalamov." He is currently a doctoral student at the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe in Marburg (working title of his thesis: "Paramilitärische Verbände im Ostmitteleuropa der Zwischenkriegszeit—Gewalt als Gemeinschaftserlebnis am Beispiel der baltischen Freikorps"). His research topics include history of Eastern Europe, social history of the GDR, history of the Soviet Union, and paramilitarism.

## Notes

1. "Es geht bei gedämpftem Trommelklang / Wie finster das Antlitz, wie trüb der Gesang / O Deutschland, wie ist uns das Herz so schwer / Wir sind ja die letzten vom alten Heer. / Wir haben gestanden auf eiserner Wacht, / Der Feind hat uns nimmer zum Wanken gebracht. / Wir haben gehalten in treuloser Zeit / Der Fahne, den Führern den treudeutschen Eid. / Nun ruft uns die Heimat auf fremdes Gebot. / Wir müssen zurück, ob Gefahr uns auch droht, Wir haben gestanden, wir fürchten uns nicht, / Doch das aber ist unsere härteste Pflicht." "Kampflied der Baltikumer" (*Der Reiter gen Osten* 5, 1938: 29).
2. Different aspects of this text are part of the doctoral thesis by the author, which is being developed within the DFG research project, Gewaltgemeinschaften, at the Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe, Marburg.
3. See, regarding the pejorative usage of the term, Noske (1920: 183–84).
4. See Schulze (1969: 131–32). In this context, Schulze deviates strongly in his interpretation of the ceasefire agreement from its interpretation by the Germans. See Bernhard (1995: 2–4; Sauer 1995: 36).
5. Forschungsanstalt für Kriegs- und Heeresgeschichte, ed., 1937. Darstellungen aus den Nachkriegskämpfen deutscher Truppen und Freikorps, Zweiter Band, Der Feldzug im Baltikum bis zur zweiten Einnahme von Riga, Januar bis Mai 1919 (Berlin), 140–42. The headquarters of the Anwerbestelle Baltenland was in Berlin, but several local branches spread over all of Germany. Although its work was officially authorized by the war ministry, situations arose that evoked memories of the "time of Wallenstein." See concerning this, Noske (1920: 116); Maercker (1921: 226).
6. For the significance of the so-called "settlement promise," see also Blücher (1951: 70). To Blücher, the settlement promise was "the starting point of the so-called Baltic project." See also Stavenhagen (1919); cf. also, regarding the idea of settlement, Goltz (1936: 136–37).

7. One of the biggest problems in analyzing primary sources—that is, diaries, memoirs, and letters—is the prejudiced character of the sources. Despite their indispensability, they need to be critically evaluated, not least because they are commonly self-serving and exaggerate events. Quotations from novels and personal reminiscence writings will be particularly used in this study if their statements can reflect an atmosphere or mood that gives an insight to inner motives. These sources are considered as complementary information to historiography that needs to be critically observed within its context.
8. Altogether, we can talk of three different military campaigns: the *Bolschewistenzug* of December 1918–May 1919, the *Estenkrieg* of May 1919–September 1919, and the *Lettenkrieg* of September 1919–December 1919. In all three military campaigns, the political situation around the *Freikorps* exposed it to change. See Klein (2002: 53).
9. Regarding a paramilitary unit of the Latvians, the Aizsargi, see Balkelis (2013: 202). For an English version, see Balkelis (2012: 44). Unfortunately, I do not have access to the English edition and therefore do not have the correct page reference for that edition. See also Butulis (1995: 113–24).
10. Regarding the effect of World War I on the Baltic region and on the development of new, violent group conflicts, see Liulevicius (2002; 2006a: 46–65); for the eastern front and for *Ober Ost* see Liulevicius (2006b: 295–310); as source, Oberbefehlshaber Ober Ost 1917. Still crucial is Stone (1976), and Diehl (2003: 97–112).
11. Herder Institute for Historical Research on East Central Europe Marburg, Dokumentensammlung (DSHI) 190 BR/BLW 2.
12. DSHI 120 BR/BLW 52.
13. DSHI 120 BR/BLW 9.
14. DSHI 120 BR/BLW 2; see also DSHI 120 BR/BLW 161.
15. Cf. the literature of the last months of the war in footnote 7 and the “scorched earth principle”: DSHI 190 BR/BLW 19. Cf. Schnell (2012); Baberowski (2012: 7–28).
16. Gerwarth (2013: 108–33) [in this exceptional case, we can use the German translation because the image of the spider web is not prominent in the English original: JB]; on the connections between paramilitaries and nationalistic groups, cf. Bergien (2012); Sauer (2004); on the metaphor of the web, cf. Salomon (1936: 99–100); Roth (1970).
17. The typology presented here was referenced by the author in another article. That article was published at the end of 2016 in the concluding volume of the research group *Gewaltgemeinschaften*. See Haslinger (2017).
18. On the complexity and inner inconsistency of the literature by *Freikorps* veterans, see Schellhase (2016).
19. For the biography of Müller, see Mergen (2010: 329–49; 2012) and Schleiden (1992: 25–36). On the artistic processing of the experiences in *Freikorps* by Müller, see Ansolts (1929: 56–57; 1934); Müller (1974).
20. Regarding the emotions and fears as well as the values and the self-imagination of the volunteer corps, see Theweleit (2009).
21. On the life of Ernst v. Salomons after his return, see Klein (2002: 67–124).
22. Many former *Freikorps* members operated informally and secretly, often in different cover organizations, such as detective agencies, traveling circuses and cartage companies. See also Salomon (1936: 98).
23. On the development and structure of the employment and settlement services, see *Der Reiter gen Osten* 7 (1934: 12) and *Der Reiter gen Osten* 4 (1935): 13.
24. Sauer (2002: 7). On the actions of the *Roßbacher*, see Gumbel (1979: 89–90). On the *Freikorps* magazines as information source: *Der Reiter gen Osten* 5 (1934: 12) and *Der*

- Reiter gen Osten* 6 (1935: 13); see also Voigtmann (2013: 137–38). For a partial description of what Georg Elwert called *Gewaltmärkte*, see Elwert (1997: 86–101).
25. DSHI 120 BR/BLW 57. Regarding the special group understanding and the growing solidarity of some subunits, see DSHI 120 BR/BLW 53, 85.
  26. On the special position of the Baltic project, see *Der Reiter gen Osten*, “*Baltikum Sondernummer*” 2 (1935), and *Der Reiter gen Osten* 5 (1934: 3). Albert Leo Schlageter was a soldier in World War I. After 1918 he was part of different Free Corps in the Weimar Republic. After sabotaging French occupying troops, he was arrested and executed. His militant career and his execution fostered a martyrdom around his person, which was cultivated by German nationalist groups, in particular the Nazi Party during the Third Reich.

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