



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.¹ 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).² 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).³ 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 Böehler is director of the Vienna Wiesenthal Institute for Holocaust Studies. His publications include *Civil War in Central Europe: The Reconstruction of Poland, 1918–1921* (Oxford University Press, 2018).

Ota Konrád is a full professor of modern history at Charles University in Prague. His publications include *Paths out of the Apocalypse Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Together with Rudolf Kučera) and *Geisteswissenschaften im Umbruch. Die Fächer Geschichte, Germanistik und Slawistik an der Deutschen Universität in Prag 1918–1945* (Berlin 2020).

Rudolf Kučera is director of the Masaryk Institute and Archives of the Czech Academy of Sciences and associate professor of history at the Charles University in Prague. His publications include *Paths out of the Apocalypse Physical Violence in the Fall and Renewal of Central Europe, 1914–1922* (Oxford University Press, 2022). Together with Ota Konrád) and *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life, and Working Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918* (Berghahn Books, 2016).

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).

References

- Barth, Boris. 2003. *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933*. Düsseldorf.
- . 2016. *Europa nach dem Großen Krieg: Die Krise der Demokratie in der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1938*. Frankfurt.
- Baczkowski, Michał, and Kamil Ruzsala, eds. 2016. *Doświadczenia żołnierskie Wielkiej Wojny: Studia i szkice z dziejów frontu wschodniego I wojny światowej*. Kraków.
- Bauerkämper, Arnd, and Grzegorz Rossoliński-Lieb, eds. 2017. *Fascism without Borders: Transnational Connections and Cooperation between Movements and Regimes in Europe from 1918 to 1945*. New York.
- Beneš, Jakub. 2017. “The Green Cadres and the Collapse of Austria-Hungary in 1918.” *Past & Present* 236(1): 207–41.
- Böehler, Jochen. 2018. *Civil War in Central Europe, 1918–1921: The Reconstruction of Poland*. Oxford.

- Borodziej, Włodzimierz, and Maciej Górny. 2014. *Nasza Wojna*. Vol. 1: *Imperia, 1912–1916*. Warszawa.
- . 2018. *Nasza Wojna*. Vol. 2: *Narody, 1917–1923*. Warszawa.
- Eichenberg, Julia, and John Paul Newman. 2010. “Aftershocks: Violence in Dissolving Empires after the First World War.” *Contemporary European History* 19(3): 183–94.
- Egry, Gábor. 2017. “The World between Us: State Security and the Negotiation of Social Categories in Interwar Romania.” *East Central Europe* 44(2): 17–46.
- Frankl, Michal, and Miloslav Szabó. 2015. *Budování státu bez antisemitismu: Násilí, diskurz, loajality a vznik Československa*. Praha.
- Gerwarth, Robert. 2008. “The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War.” *Past & Present* 200(1): 175–209.
- . 2016. *The Vanquished: Why the First World War Failed to End, 1917–1923*. London.
- Gerwarth, Robert, and John Horne, eds. 2012. *War in Peace: Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War*. Oxford.
- Gerwarth, Robert, and Erez Manela, eds. 2014. *Empires at War, 1911–1923*. Oxford.
- Gumz, Jonathan E. 2009. *The Resurrection and Collapse of Empire in Habsburg Serbia, 1914–1918*. Cambridge.
- Hagen, William W. 2018. *Anti-Jewish Violence in Poland, 1914–1920*. Cambridge.
- Hanebrink, Paul. 2018. *A Specter Haunting Europe: The Myth of Judeo-Bolshevism*. Cambridge.
- Holzer, Jerzy, and Jan Molenda. 1967. *Polska w pierwszej wojnie światowej*. Warszawa.
- Horne, John. 2005. “Kulturelle Demobilisierung 1919–1939: Ein sinnvoller historischer Begriff?” In *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1919–1939*, edited by Wolfgang Hardtwig, 129–50. Göttingen.
- Jindra, Zdeněk. 1984. *První světová válka*. Praha.
- Jones, Mark. 2016. *Founding Weimar: Violence and the German Revolution of 1918–1919*. Cambridge.
- Judson, Pieter M. 2016. *The Habsburg Empire: A New History*. Harvard.
- Kershaw, Ian. 2005. “War and Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe.” *Contemporary European History* 14(1): 107–23.
- Klabjan, Borut. 2011. “Scramble for Adria: Discourses of Appropriation of the Adriatic Space before and after World War I.” *Austrian History Yearbook* 40: 16–32.
- Konrád, Ota. 2018. “Two Post-war Paths: Popular Violence in the Bohemian Lands and in Austria in the Aftermath of World War I.” *Nationalities Papers* 46(5): 759–75.
- Kučera, Rudolf. 2016a. “Exploiting Victory, Bewailing Defeat: Uniformed Violence in the Creation of the New Order in Czechoslovakia and Austria 1918–1922.” *Journal of Modern History* 88(4): 827–55.
- . 2016b. *Rationed Life: Science, Everyday Life and Working-Class Politics in the Bohemian Lands, 1914–1918*. New York.
- Křížek, Jaroslav. 1968. *První světová válka*. Praha.
- Leonhard, Jörn. 2018. *Der überforderte Frieden: Versailles und die Welt; 1918–1923*. München.
- Liulevicius, Vejas G. 2000. *War Land on the Eastern Front: Culture, National Identity and German Occupation in World War I*. Cambridge.
- Mędrzecki, Włodzimierz. 2000. *Niemiecka interwencja militarna na Ukrainie w 1918 roku*. Warszawa.
- Millington, Chris. 2018. “Getting Away with Murder: Political Violence on Trial in Interwar France.” *European History Quarterly* 48(2): 256–82.

- Newman, John Paul. 2010. "Post-imperial and Post-war Violence in the South Slav Lands, 1917–1923." *Contemporary European History* 19(3): 249–65.
- . 2015. *Yugoslavia in the Shadow of War: Veterans and the Limits of State Building, 1903–1945*. Cambridge.
- Pichlík, Karel, Jaroslav Křížek, and Vlastimil Vávra. 1967. *Červenobílá a rudá: Vojáci ve válce a revoluci 1914–1918*. Praha.
- Prusin, Alexander Victor. 2005. *Nationalizing a Borderland: War, Ethnicity, and Anti-Jewish Violence in East Galicia, 1914–1920*. Alabama.
- Reichardt, Sven. 2009. *Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadristismus und in der deutschen SA*. Cologne.
- Schumann, Dirk. 2003. "Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: Eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?" *Journal of Modern European History* 1(1): 24–43.
- Stone, Norman. 1975. *The Eastern Front, 1914–1917*. New York.
- Tooze, Adam. 2014. *The Deluge: The Great War and the Remaking of Global Order, 1916–1931*. London.
- Watson, Alexander. 2014. *Ring of Steel: Germany and Austria-Hungary at War, 1914–1918*. London.
- Wilson, Tim. 2010. *Frontiers of Violence: Conflict and Identity in Ulster and Upper Silesia, 1918–1922*. Oxford.