The Great War and Paramilitarism in Europe, 1917–23

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Abstract

In this comparative conclusion, the authors consider some of the most influential trends in the historiography of political and paramilitary violence, with particular reference to the relationship between wartime and post-war violence. The heuristic value of the 'aftershocks' metaphor is considered, as are the advantages (and potential pitfalls) of the contributors' transnational approach. Finally, the authors suggest an agenda for future research on paramilitary violence, which looks at the phenomenon in a global perspective.

The contributions to this special issue raise two broader, connected questions: first, the causes of the violence (and in particular the paramilitary violence) that was such a distinctive feature of the post-war period in certain regions of Europe following the Great War and, second, the legacies of that same violence. The key in both cases is the analytical framework that best accounts for the violence and enables its significance to be measured.

Causes

The principal question regarding causality is the relationship between the 'war cultures' of 1914–18 and the cultures of violence that followed the official cessation of hostilities. Put another way, should the violent sub-cultures that emerged after the Great War be understood as a continuation of the Great War, as an aftershock of that conflict or as a rupture with the past, a harbinger of things to come?

In recent years a new research agenda has emerged in the field of war and violence, with particular reference to the conflicts of the twentieth century. Historians associated with the Historial de la Grande Guerre, the history museum established

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at Péronne in the Somme region in 1992, have been prominent in reflecting on the transformation of violence occasioned by the First World War.[1] Following George Mosse, they have suggested that the 'totalisation' process at work in the First World War generated a 'brutalisation' of both war and society by establishing new and unprecedented levels of acceptable violence which prepared the way for, and were only surpassed by, the horrors of the Second World War, during which the number of civilians killed exceeded that of combatants.[2] Other historians, such as Michael Geyer, have used the concept of the 'militarisation' of European society in this period to account for the ways in which the organisation of violence permeated societies before 1914, helping to make possible its vertiginous escalation in the ensuing war, which in turn permeated and destabilised the post-war period.[3] These reflections have been pursued in tandem with a different but related debate on 'total war'. The latter has principally concerned the internal dynamics of the two world wars (and the applicability of the concept to earlier conflicts), but the conclusion that one comes to about the internal dynamics of the Great War clearly bears on the relationship of the latter to post-war violence, both paramilitary and of other kinds.[4]

Yet none of these conceptual approaches by itself provides a satisfactory explanation of how the violence of wartime shaped the violent propensities of the post-war world. Some historians, along with a considerable number of fellow-commentators, have been tempted to view the period 1914–45 as a whole as a 'European civil war'. As used reductively by Ernst Nolte to denote an ongoing struggle between the forces of communism and fascism the concept is misleading, but perhaps it may be allowed validity as a general term 'to try to capture the sense of an era of wars and revolutions in which the symbiosis between culture, politics and violence profoundly shaped the mentalities, ideas, representations and practices of its actors'.[5] In speaking of a 'European civil war', the point is presumably not that war pitted against each other enemies drawn from the same state or polity but rather that a total conflict had a profound impact on civil society in all the belligerent countries.[6]

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[1] Important examples of the Historial approach include J. J. Becker, J. M. Winter, G. Krumeich, A. Becker and S. Audoin-Rouzeau, eds., *Guerre et cultures 1914–1918* (Paris: Colin, 1994); S. Audoin-Rouzeau and A. Becker, *1914–918: Understanding the Great War* (London: Profile Books, 2002; original French edn, 2000); J. Horne, ed., *State, Society and Mobilization in Europe during the First World War* (Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] G. L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford University Press, 1990).

[3] Michael Geyer, 'The Militarization of Europe 1914–1945', in John R. Gillis, ed., *The Militarization of the Western World* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 65–102.

[4] See in particular the project on 'total war' led by Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, which resulted in a series of volumes exploring the issue from 1864 to 1945, and in particular Roger Chickering, 'World War I and the Theory of Total War: Reflections on the British and German Cases', in Roger Chickering and Stig Förster, *Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilization on the Western Front 1914–1918* (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 35–53. See also the collaboration between the Historial de la Grande Guerre and the Institut d'Histoire du Temps Présent in comparing the two world wars in terms of violence: Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Annette Becker, Christian Ingrao and Henry Rousso, eds., *La violence de guerre, 1914–1945* (Brussels: Editions Complexe, 2002).

[5] Enzo Traverso, *A feu et à sang. De la guerre civile européenne 1914–1945* (Paris: Stock, 2007), 9 (authors' translation). Cf. Ernst Nolte, *La guerre civile européenne 1917–1945: national-socialisme et bolchévisme* (Paris: Syrtes, 2000; original German edn 1987).

Nonetheless, this still leaves unresolved the questions of how different types of post-war violence related to what had occurred during the world wars (continuities of practice and organisation as opposed to precedents and memories) and of how military violence became subsumed into politics following the First World War, before being re-translated into the supercharged military violence of the Second. The processes concerned were anything but linear. They were, moreover, fundamentally affected by differences between victory and defeat (or the perception of defeat) and between continuity and revolution. Whether law and order was maintained or overturned and whether or not political legitimacy was transferred from wartime regimes to post-war states were crucial issues in determining the space that existed for transitional violence.[7] Furthermore, the notion of a 'civil war' assumes that the dialectic of violence and politics was a largely European phenomenon, whereas the period following the First World War marked the point at which east Asia and the United States provided new poles in international relations and Europe ceased to be the centre of the world in economics and politics. The violence unleashed by the war also began to transform relations between the colonial world and the centres of empire (London, Paris, Amsterdam), signalling the end of a European dominion that would become manifest with decolonisation following the Second World War.

For all these reasons, the notion of a 'European civil war' has limited explanatory value, and the conflicts of 1917–23, and especially the paramilitary violence that was one of their hallmarks and on which the present set of articles has focused, require a more finely tuned set of concepts. The metaphor of 'aftershocks', following the seismic upheaval of the war itself, seems at first sight appealing. Yet if 'war cultures' featured in all the belligerent states in the First World War (and perhaps more strongly in the most 'developed' nation-states, such as Britain, France and Germany), post-war violence and the emergence of self-organised forces as supplements or substitutes for the state varied enormously across the former European combatants. Indeed, they may well have been strongest where the absorption of populations into the official war effort had been weakest and most problematic. This was notably the case with minority ethnic groups in the multi-national empires, which now found themselves inhabiting the broken borders – the 'shatter zones' – of the vanished empires in which new states struggled to assert themselves. It was also the case where the class conflict generated by the war, with its material shortages and disturbance of established social hierarchies, had been most acute, as in Russia, in parts of Germany and central Europe, and in Italy. In other words, some post-war societies experienced much more post-war violence than others in ways that neither 'war cultures' nor the battlefield violence of wartime account for.

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[6] Traverso, *A feu et à sang*, 151.

[7] For the importance of 'cultures of defeat' see Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery*, trans. Jefferson S. Chase (London: Granta Books, 2000); John Horne, 'Defeat and Memory in Modern History', in Jenny Macleod, ed., *Defeat and Memory: Cultural Histories of Military Defeat in the Modern Era* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 11–29.

As the essays assembled in this special issue powerfully demonstrate, post-war violence had both international and local roots and it could take very different forms, ranging from organised criminality and banditry to warlordism or para-state violence (such as the emergence of the Cheka and revolutionary terror in Bolshevik Russia). What these different manifestations of violence had in common, however, was that their emergence turned on the complete or near-complete collapse of state control over the monopoly of violence. Yet if state collapse facilitated the emergence of violence, it was not its sole cause. A series of other factors helped to determine the nature and intensity of post-war violence. As already suggested, one was the rivalry of different ethnic groups struggling to secure borders or contesting their minority status within newly formed or reconstructed states (the clash between Poles and Germans in Silesia, between different ethnic groups in the new Baltic states or between Protestants and Catholics in northern Ireland are cases in point).

A second factor was the clash of competing ideologies triggered by the war, as communism, fascism and a more self-conscious liberal democracy began to reshape the political landscape. Yet the very importance of this ideological conflict meant that it took many forms and affected much more of Europe, North America and the colonial world than the regions that experienced significant paramilitary and para-state violence. If Bolshevism and the Russian Revolution of 1917 had injected new energies into the complex interplay of radical and reactionary ideological agendas, violence was most extreme in areas where ideological conflict interacted both with ethnic tensions and with the attempt to construct new nation states.[8]

Conversely, ethnic rivalries and the use of paramilitary violence to establish or assert the existence of a new nation-state might occur without significant reference to the communism or anti-communism where the affirmation of national identity was principal issue in contention. The causes of the violence were therefore multiple. A reasonable hypothesis would be that zones where ethnic and ideological violence most closely overlapped and where the transition of state power was most problematic and contested were likely to be the most intense sites of paramilitary and para-state violence. But such overarching concepts should not blind one to the importance of local traditions and conditions, often deriving from much older conflicts, which shaped the violence that emerged after the war. The *chetnik* tradition of guerrilla warfare in the Balkans and the physical force tradition of Irish republicanism are cases in point. As Stathis Kalyvas has noted, historians have been at pains, especially in recent decades, to emphasise that the 'real' dynamics of apparently political or ideological violence in civil wars and revolutionary conflicts lay in the less immediately visible context of ethnic tensions, material conflicts or community rivalries. Viewed from this perspective, much of what might appear to be political, or was indeed claimed to be political by actors at the time, was motivated by pre-existing social tensions or was a by-product of envy, greed or lust.[9]

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[8] Peter Gatrell, 'War after the War: Conflicts, 1919–1923', in John Horne, ed., *Blackwell Companion to the First World War* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2010), 558–75.

[9] Stathus Kalyvas, *The Logic of Violence in Civil War* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), 365–87.

Legacies

The scale of the violence that occurred after the Great War in many areas of Europe, as well as on its margins in the conflicts between Greek and Turkish forces in Asia Minor, demonstrated the marked change that had taken place in political culture since 1914. Violence was no longer an exceptional tactic, but had become integral to the modus operandi of new and highly dynamic movements active on the extremes of the political spectrum. In a world in which many regimes appeared to lack both solidity and legitimacy, the incentive to remain within the conventional boundaries of political legality had largely disappeared. The future appeared to belong, as proved to be the case with the Fascist seizure of power in Italy in 1922, to those who showed the greatest willingness to resort to direct violent action.

As a tentative political stability was achieved in most areas of Europe by the mid-1920s, so the large-scale violence of the immediate post-war years gradually disappeared. What did not go away, however, was a wider culture of violent rhetoric, uniformed politics and street fighting. These processes by which the violence of armed conflict was reabsorbed into politics proved perhaps the most durable legacy of the upheavals of the post-war period. A second longer-term legacy of this period was the perceived need to cleanse communities of their alien elements before a utopian new society could emerge, to root out those who were perceived to be harmful to the balance of the community. This belief constituted a powerful component of the common currency of radical politics and action in Europe between 1917 and the later 1940s. Whatever its manifold political expressions, this politics of the purified community was a prominent element of peasant dreams, workers' ambitions and bureaucratic models of a People's Community. As such, it provides an important key for understanding the cycles of violence that characterised so many revolutionary upheavals in Europe after 1917.[10] In Spain, for example, the dynamics of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence during the 1930s were driven forward by the way in which both sides, Nationalist and Republican, saw themselves as engaged in campaigns of purification: they were seeking to rid the body politic through actual or symbolic violence of those who, as a consequence of their ideological views, their social origins or their individual character, were prejudicial to the wider health of the community.[11] It was, however, indisputably in the ethnically diverse states of central and eastern Europe in the decades between the collapse of the pre-First World War empires and the enforced pacification of the early Cold War that these notions of the health of the community reached their fullest expression.

The ways by which these notions of purification and of purging were carried through by paramilitary movements owed much to the context in which they operated, and more especially to the crises of state authority and the exacerbation of inter-community relations by military conflicts and economic change. The period of transition following the First World War may prove, on further examination, to have played a seminal role both as a precedent and as a source of legitimation for ongoing cults of violence.

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[10] Martin Conway and Robert Gerwarth, 'Revolution', in Donald Bloxham and Robert Gerwarth, eds., *Modernity and Destruction: Political Violence in Europe's Long Twentieth Century* (Cambridge University Press, 2010).

[11] Michael Richards, *A Time of Silence: Civil War and the Culture of Repression in Franco's Spain, 1936–1945* (Cambridge University Press, 1998).

Future research

Future research into the origins, manifestations and legacies of twentieth-century paramilitarism could potentially develop in two distinct directions. First, an argument could be made for a genuinely global, comparative perspective on post-war paramilitarism. This special issue has focused on Europe between 1917 and 1923 for practical reasons. But paramilitary violence had ramifications in the colonial world, not least because, as suggested, it, too, experienced the combination (which varied according to particular colonial contexts) of ethnic rivalries, the aspiration to create post-colonial states and ideological conflict. Nascent anti-colonial movements took inspiration from the Wilsonian discourse on democratic national self-determination at the Paris Peace Conference.[12] But the Communist (Third) International's declaration of support for colonial struggles against 'imperialism' at its second congress in August 1920 extended to the colonial domain notions of class war against the capitalist world.

The fear of nationalist and communist revolt in the colonies began to reshape the relations of the British and French with their empires. While this led to reform as well as repression, the immediate result was violence against new colonial demands that often entailed the use of paramilitary forces. Ireland's colonial status was uniquely complex. But the British used paramilitary formations against the guerrilla war of the IRA that included the Black and Tans, a remarkably under-studied force, many of whose members travelled to other colonial trouble spots, including Palestine.[13] In Egypt, India and Iraq, as well as in Afghanistan and Burma, Britain responded to demands and unrest by the colonised with armed police and paramilitary units as well as the military.[14] Comparable use of paramilitary violence by the French in Algeria, Syria and Indo-China, let alone in the ongoing war of conquest in Morocco, appears to be almost completely unexplored. A global comparative framework could highlight important similarities and differences between incidents of post-1918 paramilitary violence in Europe and in the European blue-water empires, particularly if such a comparison were flexible in its temporal scope, including the struggles of anti-colonial para-state movements in the 1950s and 1960s.

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[12] Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford University Press, 2007).

[13] Charles Townshend, *Britain's Civil Wars: Counterinsurgency in the Twentieth Century* (London: Faber, 1986), 191–2; Bernard Wasserstein, *The British in Palestine: The Mandatory Government and the Arab–Jewish Conflict* (London: Royal Historical Society, 1978); idem, *Herbert Samuel: A Political Life* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).

[14] David M. Anderson and David Killingray, eds., *Policing and Decolonisation: Politics, Nationalism, and the Police, 1917–65* (Manchester University Press, 1992); Thomas R. Mockaitis, *British Counterinsurgency, 1919–60* (Basingstoke: Macmillan 1990); Kevin Grant, *A Civilised Savagery: Britain and the New Slaveries in Africa, 1884–1926* (London: Routledge, 2005); Peter Slugett, *Britain in Iraq: Contriving King and Country*, 2nd rev. edn, (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 61, 91; Derek Sayer, 'British Reaction to the Amritsar Massacre 1919–1920', *Past and Present*, 131 (1991),130–64.

A second potential course of future research is a diachronic comparison of cultural demobilisation and remobilisation in the three post-war periods of the twentieth century: post-1918, post-1945 and post-1990. A comparative investigation of how European societies over the course of the twentieth century have exited 'total' conflicts would offer a privileged perspective on the perpetuation of militarised violence in post-war politics across time and space, be it in the form of recurrent civil wars or paramilitary activity, and help to address the fundamentally important question of how, when and why demobilisation fails in certain circumstances but not in others.[15]

In both regards, the period of 1917–23 is likely to stand out with particular importance. For the essential point about the First World War is that it initiated far more than it resolved, which is why it has proved so hard to evaluate both at the time and since. While the high road of its conventional military and diplomatic consequences has long received the most attention, the far more diffuse paths by which it was actively transformed into long-lasting patterns of political and military violence within and between the post-war states and within the colonial world may ultimately be shown to have been even more influential.

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[15] For a first attempt see John Horne, 'Guerres et reconciliations européennes au 20e siècle', in Jean-Noël Jeanneney, ed., *Les 27 leçons d'histoire* (Paris: Seuil, 2009), 137–45 (abridged version), and in *Vingtième siècle*, 104 (2009), 3–15 (full version).