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The Front Lines: A Space of Violence. Characteristics, Mechanisms, and Contexts of Military Violence in the First World War between Containment and Escalation

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Abstract

This article deals with the war crimes committed during the First World War. Whereas in historiography the presence of franc-tireurs, the new industrial warfare or the specific military and radicalised command culture of individual armies often served as explanatory patterns for the escalation of violence, this contribution attempts to introduce a different perspective into the discussion. The focus is on the specific violence of mobile warfare, which was articulated in the context of military “forward panics” (Randall Collins) on the Eastern and Balkan fronts and was responsible for a considerable part of the war crimes committed there. The article therefore deals with the nature and character of these military forward panics. Starting with a description of the spatial characteristics of the front as a specific space of violence, the role of military orders and the significance of the front as a soldierly space of imagination, the article analyses above all the structural violence of forward panics. In this context, the article discusses three factors that played an essential role in this escalation process: first, the special soldierly frame of reference of combat in mobile warfare, which continuously lowered the inhibition thresholds for the escalation of violence; second, the escalation-forcing dynamics that the swift advance or the flight-like retreat of the troops brought with it for the process of violence; and finally, third, the significance of soldierly group pressure for the process of escalation of violence.

Introduction

From the outset of World War I in 1914, internal military reports on troops’ experiences—both in the German and the Imperial-Royal armies—repeatedly referred to a seemingly uncontrollable excess of violence among soldiers, who committed acts contrary to ideas of humane warfare. Military leaders observed these incidents with suspicion and, as a consequence, introduced a command and instruction practice that condemned crimes, tightened penalties (which included summary executions), and urgently appealed to soldiers to act in accordance with international law. However, these vigorous instructions had little effect, as the number of complaints and grievances increased over the course of the war, leaving both military commanders and civilian observers at a loss. In November 1914, for example, the governor of Galicia reported to the Austrian minister of the interior that, in the context of the first rearguard battles on the Austrian-Russian eastern front, “looting, pillaging, branding, and raping” by Austro-Hungarian troops was daily fare.¹ He continued that

¹ Report of the Imperial-Royal Governor of Galicia to the Minister of the Interior, November 29, 1914 (strictly confidential), Österreichisches Staatsarchiv (ÖStA), Allgemeines Verwaltungsarchiv (AVA), Ministerium des Innern (Mdi), Präs. 1915, 19/3, Kt. No. 1810, at: No. 453, December 28, 1915 (Wirtschaftliche und politische Verhältnisse in Galizien unter Einwirkung der Kriegseignisse).

Austro-Hungarian troops also “burn down” or “otherwise destroy” entire “villages ... for no necessary reason” in Serbia.² “Our troops have wreaked havoc worse than the Swedes in the Thirty Years’ War,” the chief of the general staff division of the Fifth Army Command in Mitrovica, Serbia, noted in his diary on October 1, 1914. He continued that “nothing, absolutely nothing is in one piece.”³ The Serbian enemy had also “behaved like a conqueror without culture,” “destroying the property of the population.” Furthermore, “rapes have taken place and peaceful residents have been murdered or taken prisoner.”⁴ In a similar vein, it was said that Russian troops had caused “Vandalic devastation” in the eastern theater of war.⁵ In many cases, everything was destroyed “in a senseless rage.”⁶ It was like a “sea of blood and horrors, of senseless devastation and useless deportation of people, of fire and looting.”⁷ Thus it was only shortly after the war began that—in the words of the Bohemian officer Ernst Cermak—“the human beast, unleashed through the war” gave rise to horror and indignation.⁸

Historiographical discourse has often explained the much cited “unleashed human beast” in a rather one-dimensional and categorical way. In this vein, historians have referred to a radicalized culture of military warfare with respect to specific armies—often precisely those that are the historian’s research focus.⁹ For a long time, “German atrocities,” seen in Belgium and northern France at the beginning of the war, were considered somewhat unprecedented and exceptional.¹⁰ A ruthless military command culture has served as another explanation for the escalation of violence, with historians pointing to aspects of army organizational structure. The latter has fed the often-stated assumption that the escalation of violence was caused by systemically occurring, explicitly ordered—or rather motivated—transgressions of norms.¹¹ Yet such interpretations distort a much more complex set of circumstances.

² K.u.k. 9. Infanterie-Truppendivisionskommando, dispatch October 29, 1914. ÖStA, Kriegsarchiv (KA), Neue Feldakten (NFA), 19. Brigade, Kt. No. 191, Fasc. 1. The dispatch refers to an identical order of the High Command of the Balkan army of October 25, 1914. Major General Daniel, commander of the Fifth Army, wrote on the course of action of the imperial-royal troops in Serbia at the beginning of the war: “I was rather disconcerted to realize that in some cases troops destroyed property of another in an irresponsible manner during the occupation of Serbian villages. I should like to remind you of the orders already issued and the relevant provisions of our regulations. Such behavior of our troops, which is contrary to all international law and customs, not only lowers the reputation of our army abroad to the level of that of our enemy but is also evidence of a very concerning relaxation of discipline of the relevant body of troops.” Decree of Fifth operating Army Command, Op. No. 443/19. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 19. Brigade, Kt. No. 191, Fasc. 1, at: K.u.k. 9. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, Op. No. 3/1, October 3, 1914.

³ Diary no. 2 (September 9–November 17, 1914), entry October 1, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 36 Karl Günste.

⁴ Evidenzbüro to Sixth Army Command, December 14, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, Sixth Army, operating army command, 1914, Res.-Akten, Kt. No. 17, at: Res. No. 3072, December 1914.

⁵ For example, the 6th Corps command on the actions of Russian troops on the eastern front. 6th Corps command to Fourth Army Command, October 16, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 4. Armee, Operierendes Armeekommando, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 4.

⁶ War diary Fritz Ortlepp, 138, entry February 10, 1915. Bundesarchiv Militärarchiv Freiburg (BArch-MA), N 787/8 Fritz Ortlepp.

⁷ Fritz Ortlepp on the situation in East Prussia. War diary Fritz Ortlepp, 138, entry February 10, 1915, vol. 2 (Die Winterschlacht in Masuren. II. Die Vernichtung der 10. Russischen Armee im Walde von Augustowo February 15–23, 1915), 288.

⁸ Diary Ernst Cermak, entry August 12, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 528 Ernst Cermak, sign. 14.

⁹ A prime example for this is the study by Isabell V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction, Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2004).

¹⁰ John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial* (London: Yale University Press, 2002). Compare the biting criticism of Horne and Kramer’s thesis in the recently published study by Ulrich Keller, *Schuldfragen. Belgischer Untergrundkrieg und deutsche Vergeltung im August 1914* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2017).

¹¹ This thesis regarding the Imperial-Royal Army builds upon the works by Anton Holzer. Compare Anton Holzer, “Augenzeugen. Der Krieg gegen Zivilisten, Fotografien aus dem Ersten Weltkrieg,” *Fotogeschichte. Beiträge zur Geschichte und Ästhetik der Fotografie* 22, no. 85–86 (2002): 45–74. Older works by Hans Hautmann, which will not be quoted here, argue in a similar vein. Recent research has largely refuted these interpretations. Compare the well-founded study by Martin Schmitz, “Als ob die Welt aus den Fugen ginge.” *Kriegserfahrungen österreichisch-ungarischer Offiziere 1914–18* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016).

Recent research on military history, the history of violence, and gender history¹² that compares different fronts and armies clearly shows similarities and striking parallels in transgressions of norms.¹³ That research also rebuts hitherto commonplace *Sonderweg* arguments and renders culturalist explanations barely probable.¹⁴

But the question arises: How, then, can we explain the escalation of violence on the fronts of the First World War? Often, the historiography invokes the real or imagined presence of *franc-tireurs*, specific military cultural peculiarities, or a radicalized command culture to explain the escalation of violence. I propose looking instead at a broader perspective, and building upon recent interdisciplinary research on violence as well as new research results concerning the armies of the Central Powers in the eastern theaters of war and in the Balkans regarding violent acts committed there that broke international law. Existing studies on transgressions of military norms and war atrocities during the First World War do not—or only marginally—address more recent sociological, social sociological, or cultural scientific studies on violence. Thus an interdisciplinary history of violence of the First World War, which—unlike the Second World War—is still in its beginnings, remains a desideratum of research.¹⁵ This article will pay particular attention to the spatial and temporal situatedness of violence as a concrete practice, which is central to understanding it, but scarcely mentioned. Center stage is thus the actual military confrontation and mobile warfare that was characteristic for the eastern and the Balkan fronts of the First World War as a definitive state of “interactive violence.”¹⁶ Violent acts in military confrontations where primarily

¹² In recent decades, research in gender history has focused strongly on sexual violence in wars. Compare, for example, the more recent overview Gaby Zipfel, Regina Mühlhäuser, Kirsten Campbell, ed., *In Plain Sight. Sexual Violence in Armed Conflict* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2019), which, however, focuses on the history of the Second World War. The number of studies on the First World War is rather small. In addition to older research primarily addressing sexual violence of German soldiers against women in occupied Belgium and northern France, there are also more recent studies on other fronts, for example Laura Engelstein, “‘A Belgium of Our Own’. The Sack of Russian Kalisz, August 1914,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 10, no. 3 (Summer 2009): 441–73; Bruna Bianchi, *Crimini di guerra e contro l’umanità. Le violenze ai civili sul fronte orientale, 1914–1919* (Milan: Unicopli, 2012); Nadia Maria Filippini, “Hunger, Rape, Escape: The Many Aspects of Violence against Women and Children in the Territories of the Italian Front,” in *Rethinking the Age of Emancipation: Comparative and Transnational Perspectives on Gender, Family, and Religion in Italy and Germany, 1800–1918*, ed. Martin Baumeister, Philipp Lenhard, and Ruth Nattermann (New York and Oxford: Berghahn, 2020), 332–50. It should be noted that this contribution largely disregards the gender aspects because it primarily focuses on the theoretical and methodological foundations of the escalation of violence and the analysis of the specifics of spaces of violence rather than examining the nature of war crimes. For more information on sexual violence in the First World War, compare the planned research project (“Sexual Violence and the Habsburg Army in the First World War”), which is to be carried out in the next years at the universities of Vienna and Bolzano.

¹³ Compare, for example, Alexander Watson, “‘Unheard-of Brutality’: Russian Atrocities against Civilians in East Prussia, 1914–1915,” *Journal of Modern History* 86 (2014): 780–825; compare also, championing a comparative perspective, Oswald Überegger, “‘Verbrannte Erde’ und ‘baumelnde Gehenkte.’ Zur europäischen Dimension militärischer Normübertretung im Ersten Weltkrieg,” in *Kriegsgreuel. Die Entgrenzung der Gewalt in kriegerischen Konflikten vom Mittelalter bis ins 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Daniel Hohrath and Sönke Neitzel (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008), 241–78.

¹⁴ Compare with the overview by Markus Pöhlmann, “Über die Kriegsverbrechen von 1914,” in *Globale Machtkonflikte und Kriege. Festschrift für Stig Förster zum 65. Geburtstag*, ed. Flavio Eichmann, Markus Pöhlmann, and Dierk Walter (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2016), 125–44; Peter Lieb, “Der deutsche Krieg im Osten von 1914 bis 1919. Ein Vorläufer des Vernichtungskriegs?,” *Vierteljahrshäfte für Zeitgeschichte*, 65, no. 4 (2017): 465–506; Oswald Überegger, “Kriegsverbrechen im Ersten Weltkrieg als interdisziplinäre Gewaltgeschichte. Entwicklungslinien und Desiderata,” in *Kriegsgefängenschaft in Österreich-Ungarn 1914–1918. Historiographien, Kontext, Themen*, ed. Verena Moritz and Julia Walleczek (Vienna: Böhlau, 2021), 403–34.

¹⁵ The most inspiring study in this respect is Benjamin Ziemann, *Gewalt im Ersten Weltkrieg. Töten, Überleben, Verweigern* (Essen: Klartext, 2013). On the development of the history of violence, compare the overview by Christoph Nübel, “Neuvermessungen der Gewaltgeschichte. Über den ‘langen Ersten Weltkrieg’ (1900–1930),” *Mittelweg* 36, no. 1–2 (2015): 225–48.

¹⁶ Following Thorsten Bonacker, these were “interactions” based on the “mutual perception of presence.” Thorsten Bonacker, “Zuschreibungen der Gewalt. Zur Sinnförmigkeit interaktiver, organisierter und gesellschaftlicher Gewalt,” *Soziale Welt* 53, no. 1 (2002): 31–48, esp. 38.

situational violence spread and often escalated will be the focus. In the context of mobile warfare, atrocities and breaches of international law occurred particularly often during phases of offensive warfare when front breakthroughs were made and the rapid advances of one party provoked the hasty withdrawal of the adversary into enemy territory. This rather frequent back-and-forth constellation during battles, which often also affected the civilian population, resembles the nature of what Randall Collins has coined as “forward panic.”¹⁷ Much excessive violence occurred in the context of the specific dynamics of violence during forward panics of military units. Based on this assumption, I will shed light on the nature and character of military forward panics during the First World War. Central are, first, the “dynamics of escalation and aggravation,”¹⁸ which were per se inherent to the specific process of violence in forward panics during battles and combats. Second, I will focus on the organizational “self-enhancement effects,”¹⁹ and thus—informed by organizational sociology—explore to what extent and, more specifically, which military organizational aspects could have had escalating effects in combat.

The first section will map out the constitutive characteristics of the front as a specific site of violence, the role that military commands played, and the significance of the front as an imaginative space for soldiers. In addition to situational conditionalities of forward panic, which will be subsequently probed, these three central factors also had a decisive impact on the nature of violence in military confrontations.

Constitutive Characteristics of the Front as a Site of Violence

The soldier’s relationship to the prevailing practice of violence was shaped by two main features: first, the hermetically sealed battlefield²⁰ due to the tendency to create a secured and confined front space through military regulations and the threat of penalties, a tendency that increased over the course of the war. On the eastern and Balkan fronts during the First World War, the German as well as the Austro-Hungarian battle zone was usually three to five kilometers wide²¹ and was referred to as the “prohibited area,”²² or “no-go zone.”²³ Over the course of the war, both one’s own population and enemy civilian populations—primarily because they were often suspected of collective espionage—were evacuated or deported from the actual combat zone. This zone permanently changed under the conditions of mobile warfare to the rear area or hinterland. Deportations of civilians were usually limited to the immediate front area. More extensive evacuations of civilians from the wider front area were supposed to be avoided because rearward mass movement was deemed inad-

¹⁷ On this notion compare Randall Collins, *Violence: A Micro-sociological Theory* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008), 83–133.

¹⁸ Günther Ortman, *Organisation und Moral. Die dunkle Seite* (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2010), 25.

¹⁹ Ortman, *Organisation und Moral*.

²⁰ Following Jens Marburg, who speaks of the “hermetic of this social space” regarding the battlefield. Jens Warburg, “Maschinen der Vernichtung. Das industrialisierte Schlachtfeld,” in *Ordnungen der Gewalt. Beiträge zu einer politischen Soziologie der Gewalt und des Krieges*, ed. Sighard Neckel and Michael Schwab-Trapp (Opladen: Leske und Budrich, 1999), 87–118, esp. 110.

²¹ Compare with, for example, Bayerisches Hauptstaatsarchiv, Kriegsarchiv (BayHStA-KA), 11. Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 94, Akt 2 Zivilbevölkerung, Armeegruppe Bernhardt, Ib No. 786, September 2, 1916 (Bestimmungen für die Zivilbevölkerung im Bereiche der Armeegruppe Bernhardt); BayHStA-KA, Alpenkorps, Bund 525, Generalkommando Korps Krafft, Ib No. 216, January 27, 1917; BayHStA-KA, Bayerische Kavallerie-Division, Bund 30, Akt 4, 10. Armeeoberkommando, Nachrichtenoffizier, No. 184/16 I, January 9, 1916 (Feindliche Spionagetätigkeit).

²² BayHStA-KA, Bayerische Kavallerie-Division, Bund 30, Akt 4, 10. Armeeoberkommando, Nachrichtenoffizier, No. 184/16 I, January 9, 1916.

²³ Sächsisches Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden (SHStA), 11362 Feldartilleriebrigaden/Artilleriekommandeure, Artilleriekommandeur No. 140, Einwohner im besetzten Gebiet, No. 759, Verst. III. Reserve-Korps, General-Kommando, Abt. Ic No. 1175/17, June 27, 1917.

visible, due to the gradually deteriorating food situation in the rear area and hinterland.²⁴ The German troops established so-called *Ortsbereiche* (local areas) with *Ortskommandanturen* (local commander's offices) in those areas of the combat zones that were adjacent to the hermetically sealed positions. Local commanders—*Ortskommandanten*—as chiefs of the *Ortskommandanturen* were invested with extensive police powers. They commanded the military police or military gendarmerie, which was responsible for maintaining public safety in the command area and, above all, surveilling the civilian population. This surveillance implied a close-meshed system of control, acquisition, and repression measures that enabled the arrest or rather the deportation of allegedly suspicious civilians and drastically restricted civilian movement in response to risk considerations.²⁵ In addition to various measures to keep the civilian population under surveillance, the executive bodies of the *Ortskommandanturen* and, in the Austro-Hungarian sphere of influence, the posts of the country or military gendarmerie (*Landes- or Feldgendarmerie*) were also in charge of cordoning off the front area. Warning and prohibition signs as well as periodically repeated announcements informed the civilian population in the villages located near the front zone about these measures.²⁶ They were intended not only to keep the local population away from the front lines but also to prevent soldiers from escaping to the hinterland via the “prohibited zone.” The high number of soldiers flowing back after being scattered during military combat and the increasing number of offenses of military refusal and evasion became growing problems for the German and particularly the Austro-Hungarian armies. “There are more armed persons behind the front lines than at the front lines,” noted the commander of the Austro-Hungarian First Army, disappointed and exasperated, in his diary. From his perspective, it was “terrible how many people are roving about in the rear.”²⁷ Even Field Marshall General August von Mackensen complained that “stragglers lingering behind the front lines” had become “a menace.”²⁸ Almost in resignation, the Austro-Hungarian 32nd Infantry Division stated that “ruthless measures [are] absolutely necessary,” otherwise “the troops will flutter apart and crumble away completely.”²⁹ To better manage the “scattered” soldiers fleeing the front lines, additional gendarmerie, police, and military units were deployed in the prohibited zone of the front area. The military leadership also reminded the commanding officers of the need of “draconian stringency”³⁰ in dealing with so-called “shirkers,” as they were referred to in military jargon.³¹ Occasionally, several

²⁴ Compare with ÖStA, KA, 4. Armee, Operierendes Armeekommando, 1915, Kt. No. 19, Fourth Army Command to Army Group Command Linsingen, December 22, 1915; SHStA Dresden, 11362 Feldartilleriebrigaden/Artilleriekommandeure, Artilleriekommandeur No. 140, Einwohner im besetzten Gebiet, No. 759, General Command of verst. IIIrd Reserve Corps to Army Group Eichhorn, March 9, 1917 (Abschub der Landeseinwohner) (confidential).

²⁵ Compare, for example, the regulations in the area of the Army Group Bernhardi: BayHStA-KA, 11. Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 94, Akt 2 Zivilbevölkerung, Armeegruppe Bernhardi, Ie No. 786, September 2, 1916 (Bestimmungen für die Zivilbevölkerung im Bereiche der Armeegruppe Bernhardi). Compare also the regulation in the area of the 10th Bavarian Infantry Division at Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 41, Akt 4, 10. Bayerische Infanteriedivision, Ib No. 6319, October 6, 1916 (Generalkommando des Karpathenkorps, Ia No. 150, October 5, 1916).

²⁶ The General Command of the verst. IIIrd Reserve Corps ordered for example: “Warning signs in German and Russian reading: ‘Stop!’ have to be installed at all paths and roads leading into the prohibited zone, if this has not yet been done.” BayHStA-KA, Bund 41, Akt 4, 10. Bayerische Infanteriedivision. The Alpine Corps in Transylvania ordered that the “rearward demarcation line of this zone must be marked with warning signs.” BayHStA-KA, Alpenkorps, Bund 525, Generalkommando des Korps Krafft, Ib No. 216, January 27, 1917 (Polizeiliche Überwachung der Einwohner).

²⁷ ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B3 Dankl, sign. 5/1, war diary of Viktor Dankl, entry September 8, 1914, 133.

²⁸ BayHStA-KA, 11. Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 53, Akt 5, Oberkommando der Heeresgruppe von Mackensen, O.-Qu No. 5292, December 17, 1916.

²⁹ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 16. Infanterie-Division, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 965, K.u.k. 32. Infantry Division Command to Second Army Command, Op. No. 82/8, October 21, 1914, at Op. No. 103/1, October 23, 1914.

³⁰ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 8. Infanterie-Division, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 471, Imperial-Royal Fourth Army Command to 8th Infantry Division, September 4, 1914.

³¹ As an example of the extensive regulations in the area of the Third Austro-Hungarian Army operating in Serbia, compare ÖStA, KA, NFA, 8. Korps, Kt. No. 928, K.u.k. 3. Armeee-Etappenkommando, Op. No. 10.809/I,

so-called “gendarmerie cordons” (*Gendarmeriekordons*) were established in the rear area of the Austro-Hungarian eastern front in the hope of coming better to grips with the “problem” of “scattered” soldiers flowing back. Deploying organized patrols in villages and forests was intended to address the problem in an active way.³² Thus the spatial hermetic of the combat zone that impeded or rendered any form of prohibited mobility impossible affected soldiers and civilians alike. The attempt to defy this specific hermetic and its system of military prohibitions and regulations often resulted in severe penalties up to and including capital punishment. For this reason, we can, second, consider the combat zone, generally speaking, as a space “open to violence”—*gewaltoffen*—defined by both the violation of prohibitions and compliance with regulations.³³ From the perspective of the civilian population, the front line primarily represented a no-go zone of some sort. Trespassing into this space or even moving toward it within the close vicinity of the militarily defined prohibited zone could result in death. Even though the physical space of the front was cordoned-off and imagined as hermetically isolated, “front” and “homeland” were in fact not separate spheres. Recent research has convincingly shown that, despite the distance and persistent separation between the two spheres of life, there were many fields of interaction, ensuring continuous exchange.

The front soldier, on the other hand, was, above all, obliged to participate in military combat, which ipso facto meant he was not allowed to refuse to fight or to leave the combat zone without orders—both forward and backward. Moreover, the front soldier was also part of a military security apparatus that, among other things, required him to discipline and punish civilians who had wrongfully entered the front area, which could include killing them on instructions or as ordered. The soldier was thus not only a “victim” of the rigid military system of repression that suppressed nonconformist behavior at the front lines. In the context of this system of repression of the civilian population—which was possibly contrary to international law—he was also an executing “perpetrator.”

The state of command and military practice in executing the ban on civilians entering the combat zone, show a certain range both in the German and the Austro-Hungarian armies. It would appear that, in general, the prevailing practice was to eliminate civilians just for being present in the combat zone. In these cases, the state of command was clear and unambiguous: “Entering the area behind the fighting troops where local inhabitants have been evacuated is only permitted for members of the allied armies, otherwise only for persons accompanied by military personnel,” reads the order of the Army Group Linsingen that operated on the eastern front. “Whoever else is seen there will be shot.”³⁴ The German Alpine Corps issued a similar order, according to which civilians who crossed the prohibited line “could be shot without further ado.”³⁵ The same applied to the area where Württemberg troops operated on the eastern front: “It is strictly prohibited to come close to the front line! Anyone who violates this ban will be shot without exception.”³⁶ While the regulations

February 8, 1915 (Behebung der grossen Standesabgänge der Feldtruppen, ad: Feldgendarmerieabteilung des 8. KK, E. No. 150).

³² Compare ÖStA, KA, NFA, 8, Infanterie-Division, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 472, Fasc. “Abfertigungen,” dispatch December 3, 1914; ÖStA, KA, NFA, 8, Korps, Kt. No. 928, K.u.k. 3. Armee-Etappenkommando, Op. No. 10.809/1, February 8, 1915 (Behebung der grossen Standesabgänge der Feldtruppen, ad: Feldgendarmerieabteilung des 8. KK, E. No. 150); BHStA-KA, AOK Süd, Bund 15, Armeeeoberkommando der deutschen Südarmerie, Abt. 1b, No. 2460 geh., November 13, 1915.

³³ A space open to violence—“gewaltoffener Raum”—in the sense of Georg Elwert is a space “where no fixed rules contain or limit violence.” Georg Elwert, “Gewaltmärkte. Beobachtungen zur Zweckrationalität der Gewalt,” *Kölner Zeitschrift für Soziologie und Sozialpsychologie*, special issue 37 (1997): 86–101, esp. 88.

³⁴ BayHStA-KA, 11. Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 94, Akt 2 Zivilbevölkerung, Verordnung der Heeresgruppe Linsingen, September 1, 1916.

³⁵ BayHStA-KA, Alpenkorps, Bund 525, Generalkommando Korps Krafft, Ib No. 216, January 27, 1917.

³⁶ HStA Stuttgart, M 33/2 Gen. Kdo. XIII. A. K. 1914–1918, Bündel 304, AOK 8 to General Command XIII (Royal Württemberg) Army Corps, May 1, 1915 (confidential).

mentioned thus far were unambiguous, diverging command cultures and practices pertained to other bodies of troops. The threat of killing also took center stage here but was tied to certain prohibited or incriminating behavior, such as possessing a firearm, suspicion of espionage, or any other allegedly suspicious behavior. In many cases, there was no explicit instruction on how to execute the sanctions, which, at the level of issuing military orders, already allowed for some leeway. For the 17th Austro-Hungarian Corps Command, the “presence of civilians at the combat zone” was “not to be tolerated.” Those found there were either “to be arrested or killed” immediately.³⁷

In the same vein, there was a broad variety of imperatives for action represented by military orders that not only intended to keep soldiers at the front lines but also make them participate in active fighting. Three aims dominated in this respect: first, preventing soldiers from deserting to the “enemy” by crossing the death zone; second, to bring soldiers, if necessary through the use of violence, to the front lines and make them actively participate in combat; and third, to prevent soldiers from fleeing the front and escaping to their own rear area or hinterland. The range of military measures provided for the use of armed force, even including—more or less categorically—killing soldiers who violated any of these three strictures. However, actions taken against noncompliant soldiers were also governed by orders that provided a certain leeway. They demanded “strength and vigor”³⁸ without elaborating, urged the use of “all measures available,”³⁹ or stipulated nothing more than “to potentially use the force of arms.”⁴⁰ In general, however, orders that demanded “strength” even when dealing with their own soldiers were marked by an inflammatory tone. Shortly after the beginning of the war, during the battle of Galicia, the commander of the Austro-Hungarian Third Army operating on the eastern front, General Svetozar Borojevic, had already decreed that “scattered” soldiers and “shirkers” had “to be killed without consideration.” Every front soldier, he continued, had the choice “between victory, even when won with blood, and honorable perseverance before the enemy, or a certain and shameful death in the wake of an unauthorized leave of absence from his unit.”⁴¹ An order issued in the area of the First Austro-Hungarian Army on September 7, 1914, “reminded ... officers and troops” that “every superior officer has the power—and even the obligation—to immediately kill or order to kill a subordinate soldier who runs away during combat, or throws away weapons or ammunition, or stays behind to avoid combat.”⁴² In the area of the Austro-Hungarian 8th Infantry Division, it was likewise decreed that every man “is to be killed ... who, without having been wounded, is picked up without weapons and cannot present a permit or order to leave the front lines.”⁴³ Similarly, orders aimed at other bodies of troops attempted to set a deterrent

³⁷ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 13. Schützen-Division, Op. Res. u. gew. No. v. October 1914, Kt. No. 771, 17. Korpskommando, dispatch October 20, 1914. A similar order was issued in the area of the Austro-Hungarian 16th Infantry Division that read as follows: “All civilians lingering in the position are to be eliminated immediately, suspicious persons are to be arrested and or to be shot dead if even the most minor misdemeanor can be proved.” ÖStA, KA, NFA, 16. Infanteriedivision, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 964, Op. No. 39/6 (Imperial-Royal 12th Corps Command, dispatch September 15, 1914).

³⁸ BayHStA-KA, 11. Bayerische Infanterie-Division, Bund 53, Akt 5, Oberkommando der Heeresgruppe von Mackensen, O.-Qu. No. 5292, December 17, 1916.

³⁹ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 6. Armee-Etappenkommando, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 24, K.u.k. Oberkommando der Balkanstreitkräfte, Op. No. 3948, ad Op. No. 2105, December 18, 1914.

⁴⁰ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 13. Schützendivision, Op. Res. u. gew. No., December 1914, Kt. Nr 773, Op. No. 119/1914 (Fourth Army Auxiliary Command to Imperial-Royal 13th Landwehr Infantry Division Command, December 4, 1914).

⁴¹ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 6. Infanterie-Division., Res. Akten, Div. Kommandoabfertigungen 1914, Kt. No. 365, Fasc. 11a, K.u.k. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, Res. No. 269, September 7, 1914 (Res. No. 134 of the Third Army Command).

⁴² ÖStA, KA, NFA, 11. Armee, Armee-Ergänzungskommando, Res. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 371, K.u.k. 1. operierendes Armeekommando, dispatch September 7, 1914, at Res. 272, September 1, 1914 (Behandlung der Landesbewohner).

⁴³ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 8. Infanterie-Division, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 472, Fasc. “Abfertigungen,” dispatch December 3, 1914.

example.⁴⁴ During the 1914 advance in Serbia, the commander of the Balkan army gave the unambiguous order: “Marauders are to be shot.”⁴⁵

Officers’ war memories, in which narratives of violent actions against subordinate soldiers are of significant importance, and illustrate the frequent use of weapons against their own troops. As early as the initial battles on the eastern front in 1914, the commander of the First Imperial-Royal Army, General Viktor Dankl, for example, carried out a “raid” in his area of command against “shirkers” and “scattered soldiers,” issuing orders to “kill everyone.”⁴⁶ In the area of the Second Army, “gendarmes, under the leadership of officers and civilian commissioners” maintained “order ... with pistol and rope.”⁴⁷ Karl Czapp Freiherr von Birkenstetten, commander of a division on the eastern front at the beginning of the war, recalls that “all bodies” of his staff “drew their revolvers and chased the men back to the front lines at my command.”⁴⁸ First Lieutenant Richard Kolby of the Infantry Regiment 99 likewise ordered “the shooting of troops that stayed back.” This was, according to Kolbay, the “last chance to bring the discouraged troops to obedience.”⁴⁹ The Russian soldiers opposite German and Austro-Hungarian troops were likewise often held at the front lines by force of arms and literally herded toward the enemy lines. In some cases, soldiers flowing back were fired at with machine guns regardless of the consequences. When in the context of the Battle of the Masurian Lakes a larger Russian contingent intended to desert toward the German positions via the front line, Russian machine guns opened fire on their own troops. It is said that approximately 1,000 soldiers died in the process.⁵⁰ An order to shoot deserters was also given in the German and the Austro-Hungarian armies.⁵¹

Apart from and in addition to the imperative to kill in the regular course of military combat, the combat zone as a field of interaction subject to both war regulations and war practices thus represented an extremely hostile and deadly environment for soldiers and civilians alike. Its general openness to violence (*Gewalttoffenheit*) redefined the soldiers’ relationship to violence in a new way. For soldiers, experiencing military executions within the combat zone, being aware of—in the literal sense—potentially deadly consequences of non-conformist behavior, finding themselves integrated into a frontline system of penalties and repressions geared toward killing, and being subject to the imperative to kill civilians under circumstances underpinned and enforced by orders—all this turned the front spaces into what we might call “free fire zones.” Particularly for civilians, this meant that “everyone who was unlucky enough to be found in such a zone could be fired at, be it a soldier, a child, or an old man.”⁵² In general, most military orders that regulated the treatment of civilians and deviant soldiers contained a threat of death. Even rather vague orders that allowed for greater leeway still entailed a variety of possibilities of “‘You May!’ within the ‘You Must!’,” which altogether enlarged the “space of arbitrariness” regarding the treatment of

⁴⁴ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 4. Armee, Operierendes Armeekommando, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 4, Fourth Army Command to 2nd, 6th, 14th, and 17th Corps, October 24, 1914, at Op. No. 1212, October 24, 1914.

⁴⁵ ÖStA, KA, NFA, 15. Korps, Res.-Akten, Kt. No. 1894, Commander of the Balkan Army (Potiorek) to the 15th Corps Command, Res. No. 1921/OK, November 3, 1914 (Vormarsch auf serbischem Gebiete—Verhalten).

⁴⁶ ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 3 Dankl, sign. 5/1, war diary, entry September 3, 1914, 116.

⁴⁷ As remembered by Major Artur Hausner. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 217 Artur Hausner, sign 1, war diary, entry October 20, 1914.

⁴⁸ ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 170 Karl von Czapp, Sign. 1, *Kriegserinnerungen 1914—I. Teil*.

⁴⁹ ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 786 Kolbay, Sign. 2, war diary, entry August 1, 1915. The officer’s duty to bring soldiers back to the front lines—if necessary with force—is a consistent pattern in the largely unpublished officers’ war diaries and memories.

⁵⁰ BfZ, Nachlass Otto Bachof, entry January 25, 1915.

⁵¹ In the area of the 35th Reserve Division it was decreed: “NCO’s and troops are repeatedly instructed that they not only have the right but even the duty to shoot everyone who crosses the wire entanglements unauthorized.” HStA Stuttgart, M 122, Landsturm-Infanterie-Regiment (1. Württ.) No. 19, Bund 1, Fasc. confidential, 35th Reserve Division to Army Detachment Woyrsch, July 11, 1917.

⁵² Aptly described by Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 2005), 225, on the Vietnam War. The principle also applies to the First World War.

civilians and nonconformist soldiers in the front area.⁵³ A radicalizing practice of violence on the battlefield, the focus of military orders on killing, and the practice of applying them constituted experiential and organizational factors that—after having shifted due to the war—determined the soldiers’ specific subframe of reference regarding the combat zone. This subframe of reference changed the soldier’s view of his environment, integrating the scope of action as outlined previously and the experienced, suggested, ordered, or self-initiative killing of persons uninvolved in combat or of deviant combatants into the set of standards and norms of seemingly justified actions that remained unquestioned.⁵⁴

Orders with Room for Maneuver: Strict but Fair?

As mentioned in the introduction, however, those military orders given to soldiers as a binding code of conduct when they went to the battlefields—which often take center stage in historiographical analyses—must be seen in a differentiated manner. To be sure, most of codes of conduct—for example, those issued by the Austro-Hungarian army regarding the type of warfare in Serbia at the beginning of the war—clearly insisted on strictness, decisiveness, and ruthlessness. On the other hand, the military leadership also wanted to ensure that “the troops marching into Serbia would prove themselves worthy of a great power.”⁵⁵ The Imperial-Royal Army had to become a “terrible but also chivalrous adversary, who is, if necessary, ruthless, but never cruel and inhumane.”⁵⁶ The “Directives for the Behavior of the Troops in Battle and in Enemy Territory” issued by the 9th Infantry Division Command and announced to the soldiers stated: “If we in Serbia do not want to wage a war against every single citizen, then we must—naturally in strict accordance with all necessary caution and depending on circumstances—show real consideration towards the genuinely peaceful population and protect them and their property.”⁵⁷ In view of the looming war, the Austro-Hungarian army High Command at the top of the chain of command also urged complying with the regulations of the Hague Convention. Moreover, numerous instructions of different bodies of troops insisted on compliance with international law, even if the enemy would violate it.⁵⁸ A war in violation of international law was “unworthy of the army of a great power” and must be prevented “with the strictest means possible.”⁵⁹ In view of the imminent battles on July 30, 1914, the commander of the 15th Corps, General Michael Edler von Appel, reminded his soldiers: “Even when facing the

⁵³ Jan Philipp Reemtsma, “Gewalt: Monopol, Delegation, Partizipation,” in *Gewalt. Entwicklungen, Strukturen, Analyseprobleme*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer and Hans-Georg Soeffner (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2004), 346–61, esp. 350 and 352.

⁵⁴ Compare on this Oswald Überegger, “Kampfdynamiken als Gewaltspiralen. Zur Bedeutung raum-, zeit- und situationspezifischer Faktoren der Gewalteskalation im Ersten Weltkrieg,” *zeitgeschichte* 45, no. 1 (2018): 79–101; in a broader context compare also Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 2011), 37. With a view to the frame of reference, Neitzel and Welzer state: “What would be considered a deviation under the circumstances of civilian everyday life—and thus is in need of explanation and justification—becomes normal and conformist behavior.”

⁵⁵ K.u.k. 9. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, dispatch September 7, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 19. Brigade, Kt. No. 191, Fasc. 1.

⁵⁶ According to the commander of the 9th Infantry Division, Viktor Graf von Scheuchenstuel. 9th Infantry Division to 18th Infantry Brigade, No. 9, August 9, 1914. K.u.k. 9. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, dispatch September 7, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 19. Brigade, Kt. No. 191, Fasc. 1.

⁵⁷ K.u.k. 9. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, Op. No. 20/1, Direktiven für das Verhalten der Truppen im Gefechte und im Feindeslande. K.u.k. 9. Infanterietruppendivisionskommando, dispatch September 7, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 19. Brigade, Kt. No. 191, Fasc. 1.

⁵⁸ K.u.k. Armeeoberkommando/Etappenoberkommando Res. No. 7, July 29, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Qu.-Abteilung, Reservats-Akten 1914–1915, Kt. No. 1443. Compare also the decree of the Imperial-Royal Fifth Army Command, 5. Operierendes Armeekommando to 13th Corps Command in Tavna, Op. No. 403/20, August 25, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 13. Korps, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 1668, at 13. Korpskommando, Op. No. 194/56, August 27, 1914.

⁵⁹ According to Feldzeugmeister Oskar Potiorek, the Imperial-Royal commander of the Balkan army. Command of the Balkan Army to 15th Corps Command, Res. No. 1921/OK, November 3, 1914 (Vormarsch auf serbischem

enemy, do not forget the commandments of noble humanity and soldierly chivalry! Wounded enemy soldiers, defenseless women, children, and peaceful citizens are in your protective hands; property of another is inviolable and enjoys your protection!”⁶⁰

Similar decrees issued in the German army⁶¹ paint the common picture of leeway and strict-but-fair orders, oscillating between strictness and level-headedness in an antagonistic manner. The practical proportionality of the military course of action—which largely shifted between these two poles—was essentially left to the commanding officers, who interpreted and applied this leeway very differently.⁶² For example, an order of the Second Austro-Hungarian army Command prescribed “acting with all due vigor without seeking confirmation of subordinate commands.”⁶³ It was not a “systematic war of extermination,” ordered “from above,⁶⁴” but rather leeway that troops and their commanders used differently toward the two aforementioned options for action that characterized not only Austro-Hungarian warfare on the Balkan front.

In the end, the orders that insisted on both ruthlessness and humane behavior often exhibited a formulaic rhetoric. As Christopher Browning has aptly argued in a different context, “Despite the hate-filled propaganda of each nation and the exterminatory rhetoric of many leaders and commanders, such atrocities still represented a breakdown in discipline and the chain of command. They were not ‘standard operating procedure.’”⁶⁵

Indeed, it must be stressed there was no “guiding directive” (*Richtlinienbefehl*) in either the Austro-Hungarian or the German army that unconditionally ordered actions breaking international law. Having said that, the level of military command and its significance for the practice of violence should not be overestimated, either. Focusing solely on command structures and military orders “from above” is unlikely to explain the complex causes and full extent of war crimes committed on the fronts of the First World War. As will be discussed in what follows, military commands in fact played a rather minor role in the dynamics of combat. Although at least a part of transgressions of military norms apparently did not relate to any relevant orders, the numerous instructions and decrees intended to prevent them seem to have failed in containing the escalation of violence at the front lines. Violence often occurred situationally and could not be prevented by commands or orders alone.

Tensions, Fear, and Uncertainty: Battlefield Anticipations and Soldiers’ Experiences

From the soldiers’ perspectives, the beginning of a military confrontation—be it a unit’s “baptism of fire” or a rite of passage on the battlefield in subsequent combat—was shaped by “the tension of the confrontation”⁶⁶ and fear. The latter was, above all, the result of unsettling battlefield anticipations. In the soldiers’ imagination, the front lines were a

Gebiet—Verhalten). ÖStA, KA, NFA, 15. Korps, Res.-Akten, Kt. No. 1894, at 15. Korpskommando, Res. No. 739, November 5, 1914.

⁶⁰ 15. Korpskommando, Res. No. 16, July 30, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 15. Korps, Res.-Akten 1915, Kt. No. 1893.

⁶¹ “The line of action towards the population must be vigorous, objective, strict, and fair,” reads a similar German order in the context of the advance in Russian Poland. “Anordnungen und Bekanntmachungen des deutschen Kriegschefs und des Militärgouverneurs in Lukow 1915–1917 (Russisch-Polen), Anweisung für die Gendarmerie in Polen links der Weichsel.” BArch-MA, PH 30 II/36.

⁶² On the officers’ role, compare Schmitz, “*Als ob die Welt aus den Fugen ginge*.”

⁶³ Second Army Command, Res. No. 42, to Lothar Edler von Hortstein, Oberstinhaber of Infantry Regiment No. 92, Commander of the 9th Corps in Ruma, August 6, 1914. ÖStA, KA, NFA, 5. Armee, K.-Akten 1914, Kt. No. 916.

⁶⁴ Holzer, “Augenzeugen,” 55. Compare also Oswald Überegger, “Man mache diese Leute, wenn sie halbwegs verdächtig erschienen, nieder.” *Militärische Normübertretungen, Guerillakrieg und ziviler Widerstand an der Balkanfront 1914*, in *Der Balkan—Raum und Bevölkerung als Wirkungsfelder militärischer Gewalt*, ed. Bernhard Chiari and Gerhard P. Groß (Munich: XXX, 2009), 121–36; and the recent study Schmitz, “*Als ob die Welt aus den Fugen ginge*,” which clearly refutes the assumption of a war of extermination.

⁶⁵ Christopher R. Browning, *Ordinary Men: Reserve Police Battalion 11 and the Final Solution in Poland*, 2nd ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 160–61.

⁶⁶ Collins, *Violence*, 76.

threatening and hostile space of destruction and irregular warfare. This idea was not only based on one's own experiences on the ground in the context of military combat. Soldiers already anticipated the nature of the battle in the form of diffuse imaginings fed by different sources of information and a specific image of the battlefield, the enemy's supposed way of fighting, and one's own imagined position in the fighting. The significance of the front lines as an imaginative space for soldiers cannot be overestimated. Battlefield imaginations merged with one's own experiences at the front and the soldiers' war experience. The imagined battlefield was the result of information formally conveyed via military orders, official (often intelligence) recommendations "from above," and media interpretations. Other inputs also played a central role, including those conveyed via informal communication channels (such as from troops already deployed at the front via soldiers of reserve and marching units or from stories told by wounded soldiers and civilians). On various levels, numerous rumors circulating about the enemy's supposedly cruel way of warfare and breaches of international law, played a decisive role in the soldiers' imagination.

The image of the fighting conveyed by rumors and stories tended to become increasingly threatening with every step in this informal communication chain. Details of enemy atrocities, described by supposed eyewitnesses—and thus internalized as authentic—were retold from soldier to soldier. The informal rumor mongering about atrocities in some cases evoked an almost bizarre escalation, resulting in a "feeling of incalculable threat"⁶⁷ and a more or less intensive self-radicalization of soldiers based on these rumors. At the front, rumors often created an atmosphere of increasing uncertainty. Nervousness, fear, and the tension of the confrontation were ubiquitous. Infantryman Friedrich Tollich noted stories of Russian Cossacks and their way of fighting on the eastern front in his diary: "A feeling of unease permeated one's entire body. For a few seconds, one feels an invisible pressure on one's throat. One struggles to catch one's breath."⁶⁸ "The Austrian officers gave us a good scare about Serbia, where we are going," the German soldier Albrecht Harrer wrote in his diary. "For them, we were doomed."⁶⁹ In gloomy premonitions, and often even before the beginning of the combat mission, the battlefield presented itself to the soldiers as an awe-inspiring, perilous, and unregulated terrain, where serenity was the main principle and anything and everyone could turn out to be dangerous. The scenario of ubiquitous danger that circulated in rumor caused "hysterical war mania" among soldiers, as Colonel Alexander Brosch von Aarenau, commander of the 2nd Tyrolian Kaiserjäger Regiment, noted in his diary. In the eyes of his troops, "every bit of smoke" was "a burning village, every stork an airplane, every noise gunfire or the thunder of cannons."⁷⁰ "So many lies are told," wrote Paul Klette, "so much nonsense is believed." Many soldiers always expected "the worst from the enemy" and felt they were in a "tight corner."⁷¹ On August 17, 1914, Captain Josef Lechner from Steyr, Upper Austria, wrote in his diary: "The troops are getting more and more nervous. They assume the enemy is behind every movement. They think that three women are a machine gun unit."⁷²

Apart from these imaginings, tension and anxiety also resulted from individual experiences of military confrontations and were closely linked with the feeling of a ubiquitous uncertainty in the context of combat, which, for its part, caused situational moments or scenarios of individual loss of control and disorientation.⁷³ The fear of surprise attacks and guerrilla warfare of the Russian or Serbian enemy was particularly pronounced on the eastern and the Balkan fronts. Expectations and fears as well as imagined or lived experiences in

⁶⁷ As argued by Harald Welzer regarding the American soldiers in the Vietnam War. Welzer, *Täter*, 224.

⁶⁸ Friedens- und Kriegs-Erinnerungen, issue 1, fol. 79, entry August 21, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 301 Friedrich Tollich, Sign. 6.

⁶⁹ War diary Albrecht Harrer, entry September 29, 1915, 164. BHStA-KA, HS 2876.

⁷⁰ War diary of Colonel Alexander Brosch von Aarenau, August 1026, 1914, entry August 21, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 232 Alexander Brosch von Aarenau, Sign. 8.

⁷¹ Notes about war experiences, entry October 10, 1914. BArch-Ma, N 201/4 Paul Klette.

⁷² Dairy, vol. 1, entry August 17, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 974 Lechner, Sign. 1.

⁷³ On this in general compare with Welzer, *Täter*, 223–24.

this context held particular potential for unease and destabilization. The supposed or real presence of partisans or guerillas in military combat resulted in permanent anxiety among the troops, which could culminate in panic-ridden flight.

Soldiers' perceptions of combat, however, were not only shaped by fear of surprise attacks, irregular warriors, and enemy atrocities, but also by the usually chaotic nature of military confrontations. Often, soldiers were unable to target precisely and shoot effectively as a result of the tension of the confrontation in early battles. For this reason, a substantial number of troops was not actively engaged in combat⁷⁴ or started "random shoot-outs."⁷⁵ Furthermore, difficulties of orientation, the inexperience of soldiers at the beginning of the war, and obvious misunderstandings sometimes led to "friendly fire," that is, attacks on allied troops or one's own units,⁷⁶ which caused chaotic or panicked reactions and accounted for many victims.⁷⁷ According to contemporary terminology, in the moment of the military encounter "no-one had a clear idea of what was happening.... One dashes forward, one runs, one falls to the ground, gets up again, and fires like in a dream. Every sense of time is gone.... One no longer feels like a personality and is but a part, a splinter, a molecule of a formless mass, squirming in excitement and cramps."⁷⁸ This was further aggravated by the fact that, particularly at the beginning of the war, the Central Powers experienced various problems and adversities—both on the strategic and the operative levels—so that often things did not go according to plan.

All these factors characterize the battlefield as a space extremely open to violence. Managing or organizing this space was apparently very difficult and only possible to a limited extent. Thus, in the context of military confrontation, the battlefield presented itself as a genuine space of contingency or chaos. The proverbial "barbaric chaos of battle"⁷⁹ evoked a type of violence that—as mentioned previously—could hardly be brought under control by instructions, commands, orders, or appeals.

On the Situational Violence of Forward Panics

Military operational situations where a military impasse escalated and the enemy was forced to withdraw were particularly decisive regarding specific forms of violence. The scenario of

⁷⁴ Social science studies that explore this phenomenon for the time of the world wars point out that over the course of a battle only 15 to 25 percent of the troops even used their weapons. Compare on this Ulrich Bröckling, "Schlachtfeldforschung," in *Schlachtfelder. Codierung von Gewalt im medialen Wandel*, ed. Steffen Martus, Martina Münkler, and Werner Röcke (Berlin: Akademie, 2003), 189–206, esp. 200; Collins, *Violence*, 44; Andreas Herberg-Rothe, *Der Krieg. Geschichte und Gegenwart* (Frankfurt/Main: Campus, 2003), 109; Hew Strachan, "Ausbildung, Kampfgeist und die zwei Weltkriege," in *Erster Weltkrieg—Zweiter Weltkrieg. Ein Vergleich. Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland*, ed. Bruno Thoß (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002), 265–86, esp. 272.

⁷⁵ According to a report of initial war experiences on the eastern front by the 95th Infantry Brigade Command. Bericht des 95. Infanteriebrigadekommandos, undated, ÖStA, KA, AOK, Operationsabteilung, Op. Akten 1914, Kt. No. 4, at: AOK, Op. No. 2734, October 1, 1914.

⁷⁶ On this compare also Collins, *Violence*, 59–65. Seventy-five thousand French soldiers fell victim to "friendly fire" during the First World War. According to estimates, 15 to 25 percent of total losses were from accident. Compare Collins, *Violence*, 60.

⁷⁷ "Mutual shootings—mostly during night panics—often cause a murderous, self-destructing fight before one realizes the mistake." Rudolf Mlaker, *Paniken im Kriege* (no place given, 1930) (typescript manuscript). ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 1120 Rudolf Mlaker, Sign. 9. Mlaker mentions many examples of First World War Austro-Hungarian troops that shot at one another. The soldier Friedrich Tollich noted in his diary on August 21, 1914: "Vehemently shot by one of our own battalion from close range—a panic developed." *Meine Kriegserinnerungen! Erlebnisse aus dem Sommerfeldzuge 1914 gegen Russland*, issue 2, fol. 99, entry August 23, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 301 Friedrich Tollich, Sign. 6.

⁷⁸ In his study on the psychographics of the warrior, Paul Plaut quotes the account of a soldier on the baptism of fire. Paul Plaut, "Psychographie des Kriegers," in *Beiträge zur Psychologie des Krieges*, ed. William Stern and Otto Lipmann (Leipzig: Johann Ambrosius Barth, 1920), 1–123, esp. 20.

⁷⁹ Aptly Thomas Kliche, "Militärische Sozialisation," in *Krieg und Frieden. Handbuch der Konflikt- und Friedenspsychologie*, ed. Gert Sommer (Weinheim and Basel and Berlin: Beltz, 2004), 344–56, esp. 345.

hunting and fleeing often resulted in the escalation of violence, primarily due to the structure and design of a successful military offensive and the dynamics of a swift advance. I would like to propose that future research on irregular violence in the First World War should place more attention on three mutually intertwined clusters of factors crucial for these—following Randall Collin’s terminology—military “forward panics.” Not only do they refer to the already-mentioned dynamic of escalation and aggravation that the specific process of violence of the forward panic during battle was based on structurally. They also apply to organizational self-reinforcement in relation to military group dynamics. Overall, they can inform the history of violence as a spatial military history, which is of crucial significance in the context of studying soldiers’ violence in military conflict and has hitherto been largely ignored in First World War research.⁸⁰

Military offensive and defensive constellations, in which such forward panics may have played a significant role, not only occurred on the western front (especially at the beginning of the war) but also on the eastern and Balkan fronts.⁸¹ The Russian invasion of Habsburg territories, for example, led to continuous attacks on the mainly Jewish civilian population. In numerous pogroms, there was widespread looting, expulsions, massive destruction, executions, and rapes, especially in eastern Galicia. Similar attacks, part of a whole series of massacres that claimed several thousand lives, took place in East Prussia. Violent attacks of a similar scale were carried out by soldiers of the Imperial-Royal Army against the civilian populations in Galicia, Bukovina, and Serbia, who were regarded as Russophiles.⁸² According to credible estimates, the number of Serbian civilians arbitrarily executed during the first invasion in August 1914—that is, in a period of barely two weeks—totaled 3,500 to 4,000.⁸³ Finally, as a last example, reference should be made to the war crimes in the territories of today’s Ukraine in 1918, which have been researched most recently.⁸⁴ Overall, however, further studies are needed to provide a more complete picture of the escalation of violence in violation of international law on the eastern and Balkan fronts.

Battle as a Subframe of Reference in Mobile Warfare

The first cluster of factors [of what?] results from the battle in mobile warfare as a specific subframe of reference for soldiers. As a space hermetically closed via regulations and prohibitions, and due to a radicalized treatment of various forms of deviance at the front, the battlefield represented a special frame of reference for soldiers, particularly where violence was concerned. Rapidly changing spaces of violent confrontation emerged under the shadow of imminent confrontation with the enemy and during concrete phases of mobile warfare, which significantly intensified the extant character of the front as a space open to violence during phases of immobile warfare. The differentiation process of various subspaces of the extended battlefield corresponded with an experience-immanent spatial perception, as described, for example, by Kurt Lewin in his phenomenological approach to the dichotomous nature of “peace things” and “things of combat.”⁸⁵ From the perspective

⁸⁰ Compare the many points of reference in Peter Lieb and Christoph Nübel, “Raum und Militärgeschichte,” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 73, no. 1 (2014): 277–307.

⁸¹ Compare on war experiences on the eastern and the Balkan fronts: Oswald Überegger, “Lebenswelten und Deutungszusammenhänge im modernen Massenkrieg. Soldatische Kriegserfahrungen im Osten und auf dem Balkan (1914–1918),” *Militärgeschichtliche Zeitschrift* 78, no. 2 (2019): 377–411.

⁸² Compare on this the overviews in Überegger, “‘Verbrannte Erde’ und ‘baumelnde Gehenkte,’” and Lieb, “Der deutsche Krieg im Osten von 1914 bis 1919.” Laura Engelstein analyses the dynamics of violence using the example of the Polish town Kalisz in Engelstein, “A Belgium of Our Own.”

⁸³ Compare for other studies: Holzer, *Augenzeugen*.

⁸⁴ Compare among others Wolfgang Dornik, Stefan Karner, ed., *Die Besetzung der Ukraine 1918. Historischer Kontext—Forschungsstand—wirtschaftliche und soziale Folgen* (Graz and Wien and Klagenfurt: Leykam, 2008); Wolfram Dornik et al., ed., *Die Ukraine zwischen Selbstbestimmung und Fremdherrschaft 1917–1922* (Graz: Leykam, 2011).

⁸⁵ On the terminology compare Kurt Lewin and Jonathan Blower, “The Landscape of War,” *Art in Translation* 1, no. 2 (2015): 199–209.

of the soldiers, a perception-immanent metamorphosis that reidentified topographic characteristics, artificial objects, and, to some extent, also living beings, occurred on the battlefield.⁸⁶ Occasionally, the interpretation of “combat formations” (*Gefechtsgebilde*) blurred the perception of absolute horror and unease about brute force at the front as a space of destruction.⁸⁷ This interpretation tended to see destruction and extermination as necessities of war, treating the “thingly” environment with casual indifference. The changed perception of the imagined space of war as a specific space (which did not, or not to the same extent, apply to the rear area of the so-called “land” [Kurt Lewin]) resulted, as we have already seen, both from learning and coping practices of soldiers in the context of front experiences and from spatial definitions and orders that regulated their behavior on the battlefield. Perceptions and orders caused a particular spatial relation of the soldier to his environment on the battlefield. The specific triangle of the soldier, space, and environment evoked patterns of interpretation and norms of behavior that, as already mentioned, constituted a specific frame of reference for soldiers. Following Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer’s concept of the “frame of reference of war,” we can spatially specify this notion as a subframe of reference of battle.⁸⁸ “The soldier has two types of skin,” Ludwig Scholz wrote in 1920, “one has been given to him by the war, the other one he wears as a civilian.”⁸⁹ The subframe of reference contributed to redetermining the soldier’s relation to the practice of violence under spatial and temporal criteria, and defining the gray areas of and border lines between what was allowed or frowned upon at the front and in battle. “That which lies within the combat zone,” Lewin wrote, “belongs to the soldier as his rightful property, not because it has been captured—for things are quite different in the captured regions behind the position—but because, as a combat formation, it is a military thing, which is naturally there for the soldier’s benefit.”⁹⁰

The soldier’s reference-immanent understanding of the battle character of things and the essentially structural character of military advances as being open to violence—as well as military orders commanding swift and ruthless behavior on the one hand and the presence of deadly and imminent danger in view of the armed enemy and orientation difficulties in the chaotic space of battle shaped by the tension of confrontation and by fear on the other hand—redefined and, to a certain extent, escalated the soldier’s relationship to violence. This changed frame of reference included a “particular ethical concept”⁹¹ that substantially differed from general or universal moral ideas. It underpinned the practice of violence in mobile warfare confrontations with a “particular rationality”⁹² that made soldiers’ actions appear legitimate and reasonable. Abstract international legal norms or ethical considerations faded into the background within this specific combat situation,⁹³ and the extended frame of reference suggested, as Herbert Jäger aptly describes, a “freedom of action without

⁸⁶ Lewin and Blower, “The Landscape of War,” 205.

⁸⁷ Lewin and Blower, “The Landscape of War.”

⁸⁸ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 66–82.

⁸⁹ Ludwig Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front. Hinterlassene Aufzeichnungen des im Kriege gefallenen Nervenarztes* (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1920), 200

⁹⁰ Lewin and Blower, “The Landscape of War,” 205.

⁹¹ The soldiers’ particular ethical concept deviated from the general “universalistic moral concept,” According to Welzer, “We need to acknowledge different moral concepts” if “we want to better understand the actions of perpetrators from an analytical point of view.” Welzer, *Täter*, 31. In a similar vein, Kliche, “Militärische Sozialisation,” 346, speaks about a “special form of morality.”

⁹² Harald Welzer understands “particular rationality” as “a process that the actors enter with their specific perceptions and interpretation patterns and whose interpretation prompts them to actions that they consider meaningful.” Welzer, *Täter*, 46.

⁹³ As Wolfgang Sofsky has put this bluntly: “There might be rules that prohibit certain weapons or cruelties. However, once the fighting has started, they are meaningless.” He continues: “When it is about life and death, moral considerations are irrelevant.” Wolfgang Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer, 1996), 141 and 146.

accountability,”⁹⁴ including “legitimate sadisms.”⁹⁵ In his seminal psychography of the warrior, Paul Plaut recalls: “I have never seen any sort of conscience after battle, not even with very religious people; the idea of defending their own lives, protecting themselves played a dominant role.” Soldiers in battle did not “exhibit any ethical qualms,” Plaut wrote.⁹⁶ One would “kill without a qualm,” stated Erich Everth, and “shoot without thinking about what one was doing.” The “moral introspection” mostly did not happen.⁹⁷

Dynamics of Asymmetrical Confrontation

The pervasive “process of asymmetrical entrainment” in the context of military forward panics is a second important factor.⁹⁸ It essentially means that the more or less successfully and swiftly advancing warring party could also cause the—in some circumstances even panic-ridden—disintegration of the withdrawing enemy. A rapid gain of territory and the accelerating offensive—or rather withdrawal—in these cases resulted in a temporal acceleration of the military confrontation, which could ultimately have a radicalizing effect on both warring sides. An advance that in many ways resembled a “hunt”⁹⁹ often entailed the escalation of violence, even in the form of cruel war crimes. There were “moments of frenzy during a charge, at the highest expenditure of energy and in the greatest danger, when the rapid advance and nervous excitement caused some sort of ecstasy.”¹⁰⁰ After the tension and fear of the forward panic, the soldiers entered an “emotional tunnel”¹⁰¹ that resembled a “moral holiday”¹⁰² and ultimately blurred or even eliminated the differences between regular and irregular violence. Ludwig Scholz wrote: “Close combat was dominated by purely sensory, animalistic feelings: killing is almost automatic, compassion is drowned in blood and steam.”¹⁰³ Swiftly advancing during combat created a situation where “traditional legal and moral concepts were abandoned all at once.”¹⁰⁴ Over the course of the war, the nature of forward panic was further intensified by tactical innovations aimed at acceleration and surprise attacks and the transition to a “system of aggressive defensive,” which already inherently included the escalation of violence and the “extravagance of killing” to some extent.¹⁰⁵ The final result of the escalation that was already structurally laid out in the new form of military conflict, including forms of highly affective and “autotelic violence,”¹⁰⁶ which many actors themselves considered transgressive in retrospect.¹⁰⁷ Transgressions

⁹⁴ Quoted in Harald Welzer, “Die soziale Situation. Wie ganz normale Männer töten,” in *Die Anatomie des Bösen. Ein Schnitt durch Körper, Moral und Geschichte*, ed. Roger Fayet and Hans-Georg von Arburg (Baden: Hier und jetzt, 2008), 191–216, esp. 213. These are violent situations with soldiers “realizing that they can suddenly do things that would be prohibited under normal circumstances.” Welzer, “Die soziale Situation,” 212–23.

⁹⁵ Compare Elwert, “Gewaltmärkte.”

⁹⁶ Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” 69.

⁹⁷ Erich Everth, *Von der Seele des Soldaten im Felde. Bemerkungen eines Kriegsteilnehmers* (Jena: Diederichs, 1915), 26.

⁹⁸ See Collins, *Violence*, 103.

⁹⁹ On this compare Wolfgang Sofsky, “Gewaltzeit,” in *Soziologie der Gewalt*, ed. Trutz von Trotha (Opladen: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1997), 102–21, esp. 112–115; also Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, 155–72.

¹⁰⁰ Everth, *Von der Seele des Soldaten im Felde*, 18.

¹⁰¹ Collins, *Violence*, 87, 102.

¹⁰² Collins, *Violence*, 243–315.

¹⁰³ Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 195.

¹⁰⁴ Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 205.

¹⁰⁵ Michael Geyer, “Vom massenhaften Tötungshandeln, oder: Wie die Deutschen das Krieg-Machen lernten,” in *Massenhaftes Töten. Kriege und Genozide im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Peter Gleichmann and Thomas Kühne (Essen: Klartext, 2004), 105–142, esp. 140.

¹⁰⁶ In the sense of Jan Philipp Reemtsma as senseless violence. Compare Jan Philipp Reemtsma, *Vertrauen und Gewalt. Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2008), 116.

¹⁰⁷ Ludwig Scholz wrote on this: “In war, the moral senses are put to an acid test: the soldier as the ‘sole free man’ makes concessions to himself and his urges. Self-consciousness and a feeling of power prompt him to set aside qualms and glorify atrocities, which he would discard immediately when calm and sober-minded, with a certain appeal.” Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 203. “At a later date, when all is over,” Plaut quotes a soldier,

manifested themselves in murdered civilians and prisoners of war, destroyed and burned down houses and villages, as well as mass rapes. As Paul Plaut argued, “No one in his right mind would withstand the atrocities of a battle, and no one would condone them.”¹⁰⁸ In military egodocuments this “tunnel journey” is often described as a kind of deindividuation, a clouding of consciousness, a trance-like frenzy, or, in a metaphorical sense, a dream state. The soldier, understood as an “anti-subject,”¹⁰⁹ turned back into an individual in control over his actions only after the battle: “One comes to one’s senses”; it was like “awaking from a heavy dream.”¹¹⁰

However, enemy stereotypes and ideological radicalization played a minor role in the context of forward panics—which were essentially a communication-related mass phenomenon.¹¹¹ Rather, concrete experiences on the ground (death or injury of a comrade, alleged or real war atrocities of the enemy) could provoke short-term and situational feelings of hatred, rage, and revenge, which intensified or motivated violent behavior.¹¹² Individual attempts to rationalize and justify violent actions—which always referred to the battle as a space that was per se open to violence—played an important role for the soldiers’ perspective, as did so-called “path dependencies,” a concept according to which violent behavior was very likely to be repeated after a previous transgression.¹¹³ Regarding the temporal dimension of violence in military forward panics (surprise attack, break through, hunt-like pursuit of the enemy), the extent and intensity of atrocities were decisive in the context of the invasion of enemy territory, particularly with a view to advance guards and first occupation troops. The scenario of hunting and fleeing, disorientation and uncertainty about (civilian and military) defense, as well as a disciplinary system that was not fully established during the invasion phase facilitated excesses of violence. The situation usually improved with the transition from invasion to occupation and the establishment of a regular power of command.

Soldiers often experienced the previously described situations of absolute military power during the hunt-like pursuit of the enemy as an emotional peak, which even intensified violent behavior that could hardly be contained and, to some extent, corresponded with emotions such as satisfaction, passion, and joy.¹¹⁴ “Technicalized massacres,” typical of

“One feels a certain shudder about everything that has happened and that one has observed. And when the feverish nervous tension gradually gives way after the end of the battle, the civilized human being gradually comes into his own again.” Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” 21.

¹⁰⁸ Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” 20.

¹⁰⁹ In Michel Wieviorka’s sense. It “can happen,” he writes, “that violence contains dimensions which are partially or entirely arbitrary or cruel, that it appears to be a phenomenon by itself, without any other purpose than to satisfy the perpetrator, without any other sense as the one that is inherent to itself... With violence as an end in itself it is difficult to refer to the one who is committing this violence as a subject, at least if one understands the subject as being able to construe oneself, as having virtuality, and being in control over one’s own experiences as well as allowing others exactly the same.” Michel Wieviorka, *Die Gewalt* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006), 192–93.

¹¹⁰ Walter Ludwig, *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege* (Leipzig: J. A. Barth, 1919), 152. According to Ludwig, the “impressions” of the battle could be “strong enough to crush the sense of self.” Only after the battle, “ideas and associations ... can be put back in order, I try to think clearly again, the sense of self gradually comes back.”

¹¹¹ Randall Collins rightly points out that “forward panics occur in a wide range of situations, many of which lack any long-term ideology; and ideology alone without situational conditions does not produce forward panic.” Collins, *Violence*, 102. Compare in general Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, 171; on the Second World War, compare Christopher R. Browning, *Ganz normale Männer: Das Reserve-Polizeibataillon 101 und die “Endlösung” in Polen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1993), 238, and Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 288–93.

¹¹² Walter Ludwig wrote: “The urge to fight takes on a special character through the motive of revenge for fallen comrades...” Ludwig, *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege*, 156. “A captivating impression—for instance, seeing a killed comrade—together with an agitating word, an outcry, possibly under the influence of alcohol, increases the affect of the mass to the extreme,” writes, for example, Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 205.

¹¹³ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 45.

¹¹⁴ Ludwig Scholz recalls a certain incident: “One of the soldiers who came to help us was shot in the finger of his left hand. His wound was dressed and he was told to go to the city from where he could go to a military hospital. But

the First World War, are particularly striking examples of this.¹¹⁵ As mentioned earlier, advancing troops completely destroyed entire villages during these massacres without consideration of (civilian) losses. In ego-documents, soldiers repeatedly describe the numerous villages that were burned, sacked, and razed to the ground during military offenses as an “eerily beautiful picture of the war.”¹¹⁶ The Austrian soldier Otto Humpelstätter writes in his war diary about such an experience on the eastern front:

On May 5, they also shot at inhabited villages. Weeping, wailing, and lamenting, the civilians had to leave their belongings and flee the village. It was very moving to see women with babies in their arms, men carrying stuff wrapped in bedsheets, older children following them on the road. Even they were shot at. child, women, and man were left on the road, dead.¹¹⁷

In contrast to the positive emotional mood during at least partially successful assaults, depression and resignation spread during forced withdrawals. This often rendered maintaining military discipline impossible and, in the context of the often panic-stricken disintegration of defeated units, intensified violence and made military refusal a mass occurrence. “During this withdrawal, carried out under the heaviest infantry machine gun and artillery fire,” wrote an Austrian lieutenant on the eastern front in his diary in late August 1914, “all order and cohesion dissolved, the only thing everyone thought of was to save ... his own life; armor parts, sometimes the entire armor, even the rifle were thrown away, and everyone ran.”¹¹⁸ Following a similar logic as offensives, military withdrawals were in some cases also accompanied by pillage, destruction, and extreme atrocities.

Organizational Self-Enhancement Effects

Finally, a third crucial factor of violence in military forward panics is related to organizational self-enhancement effects, which result from the role of soldiers’ primary groups in battle.¹¹⁹ Based on his own experiences on the eastern front of the First World War, the German neurologist Ludwig Scholz described the importance of the military group for the process of escalating violence as follows:

In the ferocity of their excitement, it [the group or mass of soldiers] gives its members a feeling of irresistible power and takes the burden of responsibility from their shoulders (everyone follows the example of the other!); it even fills them with the sensation of

he said that he was in full swing, had already killed ‘six Russians,’ and wanted to continue....” Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 113.

¹¹⁵ Wolfgang Sofsky describes the nature of the technicalized massacre as follows: “The entire territory is razed to the ground, entire residential quarters blown up. It does not matter who is present in the village or the city, who is part of the refugee trek. But when houses are reduced to rubble, when explosions lighten up the sky like thunderbolts, when the firestorm is spreading and paints the sky a glowing red, then the perpetrator is seized with rare excitement.” Sofsky, *Traktat über die Gewalt*, 183.

¹¹⁶ As an example for many others, the soldier Friedrich Tollich. *Im Kriegsdienst! Erinnerungen aus dem Feldzuge gegen Russland*, issue III, entry October 22, 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 301 Friedrich Tollich, Sign. 6.

¹¹⁷ Diary notes of the World War 1914–1919, 38. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 1302 Otto Humpelstätter.

¹¹⁸ War diary, vol. 2, entry late August 1914. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 773 Franek, Sign. 38. “During such a withdrawal, morale gets worse and worse,” Heinrich Wiesinger, a soldier from Vienna, wrote in his diary in September 1914. “Many thousands walked, as is said ‘alongside the road,’ they no longer have a master, they throw away their bullets, they only carried what they thought was useful to them....” My military service from October 1913 to November 1918 in the “k. u. k. Feldjägerbataillon Oberst Kopal No. 10,” vol. 1, entry September 15, 1914, 134. ÖStA, KA, Nachlass B 434 Heinrich Wiesinger.

¹¹⁹ Compare in general Bröckling, “Schlachtfeldforschung,” 197. “Endurances and danger experienced together create a strong cohesion among the combatants, as every field soldier can confirm,” writes Walter Ludwig in *Beiträge zur Psychologie der Furcht im Kriege*, 156.

doing the lawful, dutiful, and meritorious thing. Once they are agitated with excitement, a different world of thoughts, a different logic takes effect. Certainly, many of the better elements will not be able to get rid of the sensation they might act wrongfully, but for the masses, the heyday of passion carries them away. And even he who can remain calm and sober-minded, will get suspicious of himself, of his judgement, the tenderness of his conscience, and fears that his comrades take him for heartless, unpatriotic, or even cowardly: that is why he—partly willingly, partly unwillingly—goes with the flow.¹²⁰

These remarks carve out the essential features determining the self-enhancing character of group dynamics among soldiers in battle: the process of soldiers' emotionalization in the context of military confrontation; group-immanent diffusion, or rather suspension, of responsibility; the likewise group-related process of direct mimetic communication and imitation; and, equally important, the more or less strong forms of peer pressure among soldiers. Particularly in phases of great uncertainty and tension during military confrontations, when the power of military command structures was limited or broke down completely,¹²¹ the individual soldier was even more oriented toward group behavior. A group constituted in such a way was not so much based on existing military units including platoons or squads, but rather communicated in a largely informal and situational way.¹²² Smaller collectives of soldiers that emerged ad hoc during battle and were hierarchically unstructured and flexible gained particular significance. These small groups, which often existed for only a short time, played an increasingly important role over the course of the war due to a shift toward mission-type tactics. In many cases, however, continuous changes in the composition of informal groups were simply the result of soldiers being killed, wounded, or scattered. For the individual soldier, the importance of the group was related to general uncertainty and imminent danger as well as to the specific challenges of the military confrontation.¹²³ In these dangerous situations, soldiers often followed the behavior of the group. The group and its changing leaders often effectively functioned as the “only reference group without any alternative”¹²⁴ providing guidance:

Anyone who gives the signal to move, who, for any reason whatsoever, continues to move, who rushes forward, a single word “Go” or “Move on,” brings movement into the whole line and makes it move forward again after the stoppage. This individual, who awakens spontaneously and has the power to carry along the others, does not have to stand out from the masses through particular courage or bravery—on the contrary, it is often nothing more than a streak of desperation in an individual that eliminates the stoppage. The others follow instinctively, they sink into the collective of the group.¹²⁵

The “greater the uncertainty” and “the more unfamiliar a situation,” the “stronger” the “consensus with the group” that determined the relevant subframe of reference in a largely

¹²⁰ Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 205–04.

¹²¹ Compare on the marginal significance of orders and commands in battle; Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” 23–24. According to Scholz “the whiff of freedom” was “strongest in the fresh world of mobile warfare.” “With the current scattered warfare,” Scholz continues, “comings and goings, bravery and cowardice of an individual or a group can be decisive. Consider, for example, an assault. Not even the company leader, or the platoon leader, has complete control over his men: what is he supposed to do if he jumps out of the trenches and his troops won't follow him?” Scholz, *Seelenleben des Soldaten an der Front*, 52.

¹²² On formal and informal groups as “basic forms of social structure formation” and the “spontaneous character” of the informal group, compare Hermann L. Gukenbiehl, “Formelle und informelle Gruppe als Grundformen sozialer Strukturbildung,” in *Einführung in die Gruppensozologie*, ed. Bernhard Schäfers (Wiesbaden: Quelle & Meyer, 1999), 80–96, esp. 83–84.

¹²³ Compare also Bröckling, “Schlachtfeldforschung,” 197–98.

¹²⁴ Neitzel and Welzer, *Soldaten*, 31.

¹²⁵ Plaut, “Psychographie des Kriegers,” 24–25.

communication-immanent way.¹²⁶ The group was the point of reference for the soldiers' group-specific "practice legitimation recursions," that is, actions legitimated through practice.¹²⁷ The moral compatibility of soldiers' actions was hardly ever questioned. Thus the group was also a site of suppression of moral qualms.¹²⁸

Conclusion

War violence and the escalation of violence that broke international law become comprehensible only when the industrialized battlefield as the site of the military confrontation is not considered as an exclusively "thingly" or—more specifically, military geographical and physical—space but rather, using Kurt Lewin's field-theoretical terminology, a "psychological living space"¹²⁹ in a broader cultural geographical sense.¹³⁰ In this context, "inner spaces" of the battlefield, temporal rhythms of military confrontations in these spaces as violent social practice, and the soldiers' spatial and temporal frame of reference that provided guidance come to the fore. Alongside command structure, soldiers' imaginations of the front, as a threatening imaginative space, and perceptions of the battlefield, future research should pay more attention to dynamics of concrete combat operations and confrontations and their effects on practices of violence. A central question in this context is: which force fields, patterns of communication, and situational characteristics were decisive for those military forward panics that occurred in the context of operative offensives, and which often and in many places let combat get out of control?

The group-specific frame of reference served as a crucial guideline for soldiers' social practice of violence—particularly in those situations that we today regard as transgressive and as having violated international law. This frame of reference established a morality that blatantly differed from peace standards and, "from the perspective of the actors," was able "to claim validity and guide their actions" in terms of the transgression of military norms.¹³¹ Recent historiographical studies, increasingly informed by an interdisciplinary history of violence, have shown that several situational and experience-immanent factors affected the escalation of violence in a specific way—possibly to a greater extent than organizational (commands) and dispositional (ideology, enemy stereotypes, etc.) factors. The question of how and to what extent these various factors contributed to the process of violence, which can probably only be answered by further case studies, is still a great challenge for research on the First World War.

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¹²⁶ Welzer, *Täter*, 89.

¹²⁷ Ortman aptly in *Organisation Moral*, 125.

¹²⁸ Ortman speaks of "organization as a machinery of suppression." Ortman, *Organisation und Moral*, 129. Dave Grossmann speaks of "group absolutism." Dave Grossmann, "Eine Anatomie des Tötens," in *Massenhaftes Töten. Kriege und Genozide im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Peter Gleichmann and Thomas Kühne (Essen: Klartext, 2004), 55–104, esp. 62.

¹²⁹ According to Lewin as the "total range of what ... determines the behavior of an individual at a certain point of time." Kurt Lewin, *Grundzüge der topologischen Psychologie* (Bern and Stuttgart: Huber, 1969), 34.

¹³⁰ On this compare Bernd Hüppauf, "Das Schlachtfeld als Raum im Kopf. Mit einem Postscriptum nach dem 11. September 2001," in *Schlachtfelder. Codierung von Gewalt im medialen Wandel*, ed. Steffen Martus, Marin Münkler, and Werner Röcke (Berlin: Akademie, 2003), 207–33.

¹³¹ Welzer, *Täter*, 31.

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