

JOCHEN BÖHLER, OTA KONRÁD, RUDOLF KUČERA (EDS.), *In the Shadow of the Great War: Physical Violence in East-Central Europe, 1917-1923* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2021)

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Over the past several years, extensive reinterpretations of World War I have concluded that treaties and the demobilisation process were insufficient for the cataclysmic violence to simply end and the postwar hostilities and destruction must be acknowledged, for a more accurate comprehension of the interwar period. The volume edited by Jochen Böhler, Ota Konrád and Rudolf Kučera thus builds upon this gradual recalibration of the historiographic mainstream and goes beyond nation-centred and rigid historiography. It aims to “venture onto transnational and comparative ground” (p. 2), independent of analytical models and narrow concepts like “culture of defeat” and “culture of victory”. Time is rethought as a fluid transition from war to peace and space becomes the fundamental setting for violence, uncovering the preconditions for the reification of the most atrocious projections of brutality which accompanied the collapse of the old world.

In the study that opens the volume, Mathias Voigtmann tackles an extreme form of paramilitarism, namely the *Baltikumer*, as the Freikorps in the Baltic were known at the time. The terminology he uses makes it easier to understand violent mindsets. *Baltikumer* were deployed mostly in Latvia, where they created a so-called *Gewaltgemeinschaft* (“community of violence”). These irregular troops came from a disorganised demobilisation process and inflicted systemic violence upon their social and geographical area of domination, defined as *Gewaltraum* (“area of violence”). Voigtmann focuses on how combined acts of violence reinforced group identity, as he vividly depicts the “Baltic fever” (p. 12) which turned the illusory “hope of the East” into atrocity. The result was an almost nonexistent distinction between the consequences of World War I, the Russian Revolution and the civil war. These “networks of violence” shaped the bleak world of a completely dissolved official authority.

Christopher Gilley describes a similar unravelling of order, following the potential opportunities that appeared after the collapse of Ukraine's neighbours. From 1917 onwards, Ukraine witnessed a succession of foreign influences: Bolsheviks, Whites, Poles, the Central Powers and the Entente. This background allowed for the ascent of the Ukrainian People's Republic, led by Symon Petliura, whose forces were gradually undermined by splinters and a lack of popular support. Consequently, the fiercest nationalist members leaned towards the authoritarian, anti-Semitic, yet bewitching leadership of the fascist Organization of Ukrainian Nationalists. Given the hostile conditions, it was tempting for the provincial military commanders (*otamany*) to assume leading positions in peasant rebellions, partisan movements and self-proclaimed “republics”. The rule of these warlords led to pogroms, a “paradise for those predisposed to violence” (p. 31).

Béla Bodó's case, the embodiment of mass violence in Hungary, requires an even closer observation. The collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire followed shortly after and various social groups associated with the Left were targeted. The turmoil of these years manifested itself through sexual abuse, stemming from a "larger trend of rapidly changing sexual norms and patterns of behaviour" (p. 47), driven towards "liberation" and "enslavement" at the same time. The rapes, robberies, mutilations and murders, sometimes described in detail, represent the apex of "continuous destruction". Examples include the pogrom in Diszel (where local militias caused suffering in the absence of official authority) and the painful incident of Mrs. Hamburger involving Pál Prónay's paramilitary (which reached the British press owing to its horrific cruelty).

The Mrs. Hamburger case is investigated individually by Emily R. Gioielli. The ordeal suffered at the hands of the Hungarian paramilitaries is presented painstakingly. The torturers played the active roles in a wider counter-revolutionary current, represented by legitimists, royalists and far-right radicals. They were a cast of various influences who targeted victims like Jews, feminists, social-democrats, communists, trade unionists and peasants, deepening the cruelty already caused by the White Terror in Hungary. The victim's experience is retold, followed by the analysis of its version in the British press. The incident became a symbol of post-war exploitation, revealing the limits of "women's individual experiences and agency" (p. 68). Mrs. Hamburger's tragic example shows the construction of a woman's image as a victim of political violence, while denying her political affiliation.

The next chapter's topic is journalism's filtered perception of reality. Winson Chu inspects the critical worldview of Joseph Roth, who outlined the bleak images of the Soviet-Polish War (1920-1921) and the riots in Upper Silesia (1921) as a young reporter for the *Neue Berliner Zeitung*. A remarkable figure of German literature, Roth had a "unique ability to communicate the complicated history and sensitivities of marginalised people in Eastern Europe" (p. 89). The pretended objectivity of his work was nevertheless distorted by his own mixed identity, resulting in twisted accounts of events - the Polish "malaise" was often placed in opposition to the implicit German superiority. Despite the sharp critique of his Western-centred contemporaries, Roth embraces similar stereotypes of Poland: he blames the savage behaviour of the Polish military and paramilitary, praises the resolve of the Freikorps and deems the Germanization of Upper Silesia rightful. All in all, Roth shows a transparent "scepticism about Poland's ability to function as a state and society" (p. 108), a view his status surely influenced.

The next subject under scrutiny is the suicide discourses. Hannes Leidinger gives an overview of its dynamic historiography, dating back to the works of Durkheim, who thought it outside the realm of theology, in its social context. The chapter outlines the collective experience of mass warfare, a catalyst for the significant decrease in suicide rates. The relationship between suicide and "world-weariness" is put under discussion. However, suicide was still strongly criticised by society during the 1920s, as Austria's case illustrates. Self-destruction was politically reprovved, while science, starting from psychoanalysis, approached it in studies of eugenics and experimental treatments carried out by top Austrian physicians. The

study concludes as follows: patriotic and military principles condemned suicide as a sign of “weakness”, while a certain “lack of terminological clarity” still persists, coupled with “uncertain results of scientific research” on the matter (p. 119).

Maciej Górny addresses similar concerns, diving into war-caused mental disorders, such as “neurasthenia”. The experience of agonising fear brought on by the First World War is exemplified through the case of the Austro-Hungarian army, where the staff officer and the rank-and-file felt it deeply. The medical treatment included many options, from the infamous “faradization” (electroshock) to the more humane solutions of psychoanalysis. War neurosis appears in ethnic interpretations, stating that “nondominant nationalities of the Habsburg monarchy are especially prone to mental disorders” (p. 132). Therefore, there must have existed an imperial agenda put forward by divisions of the medical and scientific units. Conversely, the dominant states showed off the “healthy minds” of their citizens.

The shifts in identity the new states underwent is further tackled by Ondřej Matějka. Czechoslovakia is set as an example for the nexus of identities disputed between leaders like Masaryk or Beneš, who embraced the “culture of victory”, and the former Austro-Hungarian Empire and its Czech minority who reinforced conservative patterns. The new republic’s vulnerability and fear of revisionism resulted in a new military defence system and the establishment of a functional army. The task is inspected through the role of YMCA, the “principal provider of welfare services” for the Czechoslovak military (p. 143). The YMCA gradually expanded its influence outside the US and became part of its colonial aspirations, compatible with the worldview of the Wilson administration. The Czechoslovak elites regarded the reorganisation as a suitable means of promoting a “winner’s” democratic mentality into the ranks of its military, thus “making youth into citizens” (p. 150).

The final chapter focuses on Romania. Cătălin Parfene presents football as a peaceful and inclusive expression of national identity, a “potent symbol” of integration for the “defeated” Other. The Romanian football team was created in 1922, during the reign of prince Carol (the future king Carol II), with direct involvement from the royal family. It was part of a broader initiative to make sports into a “nonviolent competition”. Its first players were almost exclusively foreigners (Hungarians and Germans, but also Jews, Czechs or Poles). Given the dynamics between ethnic minorities and Romania’s project of development, the national football team had a fragile status, due to its Austro-Hungarian legacy. The imperial heritage was predictable, since football developed in Transylvania at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Urban teams from the largest Transylvanian cities competed in Hungarian tournaments and several players joined both the Hungarians and the Romanians. In the Old Kingdom however, football was brought along before World War I by foreign workers from industrial-financial environments. The first clubs included very few, if any Romanians. During the interwar period, the Transylvanian pattern influenced football throughout the kingdom. It gave rise to a vibrant culture that was missing before and transformed the national team into a symbol of the nation and the state.

The final conclusion of these contributions is drawn by Boris Barth in the afterword. He restates that World War I, apart from being a painful wound for modern history, stirred

violence in Europe even after its official end. “The demobilisation of minds did not really occur until well after 1918” (p. 184). The ubiquitous displays of cruelty: revolutions, counter-revolutions, interstate conflicts, civil wars or paramilitary unrest are therefore essential for understanding the first interwar years in Europe. Moreover, these intertwined phenomena were important for Central and Eastern Europe, where the lines between civilian and military life were so blurred, that savagery could easily thrive.

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