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WAR IN PEACE

Paramilitary Violence in Europe after the Great War

Edited by **Robert Gerwarth & John Horne**

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THE GREATER WAR

General Editor ROBERT GERWARTH

The paroxysm of 1914–1918 was the epicentre of a cycle of armed conflict that in some parts of Europe began in 1912 and continued until 1923. Taken together, the volumes in this series recognize not only that the Great War has a greater chronological dimension, but also that it has a greater territorial reach than the well-published struggle on the Western Front.

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Robert Gerwarth and John Horne
Dublin, October 2011

List of Illustrations

List of Maps

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Table of Contents

1

Paramilitarism in Europe after the Great War
An Introduction

Robert Gerwarth and John Horne

'The war of the giants is over; the wars of the pygmies have begun.'
Winston Churchill, 1919

The end of the Great War did not immediately bring peace to Europe. On the contrary, revolutions, counter-revolutions, ethnic strife, pogroms, wars of independence, civil conflict, and inter-state violence continued from 1917 to 1923 as the seismic forces unleashed by the cataclysm of the Great War transformed the political landscape of much of the old continent. One or more of these kinds of violence affected Russia, the Ukraine, Finland, the Baltic states, Poland, Austria, Hungary, Germany, Italy, Anatolia, and the Caucasus. Ireland experienced a war of independence and civil war in the same period.[1]

Paramilitarism was a prominent feature in all of these conflicts and this book seeks to explore the origins, manifestations, and legacies of this form of political violence as it emerged between 1917 and 1923. By paramilitary violence we mean military or quasi-military organizations and practices that either expanded or replaced the activities of conventional military formations. Sometimes this occurred in the vacuum left by collapsing states; on other occasions it served as an adjunct to state power; in yet others it was deployed against the state. It included

[1] Recent literature on some of these conflicts includes: Serhy Yekelchyk, *Ukraine: Birth of a Modern Nation* (Oxford, 2007); Peter Hart, *The IRA at War, 1916–1923* (Oxford, 2003); Michael Reynolds, 'Native Sons: Post-Imperial Politics, Islam, and Identity in the North Caucasus, 1917–1918', *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 56 (2008), 221–47; idem, *Shattering Empires: The Clash and Collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918* (Cambridge, 2011); Norman Davies, *White Eagle, Red Star: The Polish-Soviet War, 1919–20*, (2nd edn., London, 2003). See also Peter Gatrell, 'War after the War: Conflicts, 1919–23', in: John Horne (ed.), *A Companion to World War One* (Oxford, 2010), 558–75; Alexander V. Prusin, *The Lands Between: Conflict in the East European Borderlands, 1870–1992* (Oxford, 2010), 72ff; Christoph Mick, 'Vielerlei Kriege. Osteuropa 1918–1921', in: Dietrich Beyrau, Michael Hochgeschwender, Dieter Langewiesche (eds.), *Formen des Krieges: Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart* (Paderborn: 2007), 311, 326; Piotr Wrobl, 'The Revival of Poland and Paramilitary Violence, 1918–1920', in: Rüdiger Bergien and Ralf Pröve (eds.), *Spießer, Patrioten, Revolutionäre. Militärische Mobilisierung und gesellschaftliche Ordnung in der Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2010), 281–303.

revolutionary and counter-revolutionary violence committed in the name of secular ideologies as well as ethnic violence linked to the founding of new nation-states or to minority groups which resisted this process. It shared the stage with other violence, such as social protest, insurrection, terrorism, police repression, criminality and conventional armed combat.[2]

The term 'paramilitary' was not formulated until the 1930s, when it designated the emergence of armed political formations organized on military lines in fascist states; it was subsequently developed in the 1950s to describe such formations in the wars of decolonization and in postcolonial conflicts.[3] But paramilitary formations have a much older history, whether as local militias, guerrilla movements or armed adjuncts to the forces of order. They have proved significant in periods of defeat, notably in Spain, Austria, and Prussia during the Napoleonic Wars, when standing armies were unable to halt the French advance. In their respective 'wars of liberation', Spanish guerrillas, Andreas Hofer's *Landsturm* in the Tyrolese Alps and the German *Freikorps* of 1812–13 achieved legendary status and their influence was still perceptible following the First World War, if only as a historical reference point for emerging paramilitary movements that sought to legitimate them and emulate the success of anti-Napoleonic resistance.[4] What was distinct about these new movements was that they appeared *after* a century in which national armies had become the norm and modern police formations, penal codes and prisons had helped to firmly establish a largely unchallenged monopoly of force in the hands of the state. This monopoly was eroded as the Great War dissolved into widespread, smaller conflicts.[5] Moreover, the fact that this occurred as part of a major transition in state forms, social structures and political ideologies meant that paramilitary violence was imbued with a double significance, as a force that affected the outcome of military conflicts but also as a new source of political authority and state organization. Its impact was political and symbolic as well as military and operational.

In this sense, our volume aims to think afresh about one of the most important trajectories that led from the violence of war to the relative quietude of the second half of the 1920s. Historians have proposed a number of concepts in order to assess this process. One is the presumed 'brutalization' of postwar societies. But the war experience itself (which was not dissimilar for German, Hungarian, British or French soldiers) does not sufficiently explain why politics were 'brutalized' in *some* of the former combatant states post-1918, but not in others.[6] If the 'brutalization

[2] Sven Reichardt, 'Paramilitarism', in: Cyprian P. Blamires (ed.), *World Fascism: A Historical Encyclopedia*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara, Ca, 2006), here vol. 1, 506–7. See, too: Alex Alvarez, *Governments, Citizens, and Genocide: A Comparative and Interdisciplinary Approach* (Bloomington, Indiana, 2001), 91ff.

[3] 'Paramilitary Forces', in: Trevor N. Dupuy (ed.), *International Military and Defence Encyclopedia*, vol. 5 (Washington and New York, 1993), 2104–7.

[4] Daniel Moran and Arthur Moran (eds.), *People in Arms. Military Myth and National Mobilization since the French Revolution* (Cambridge, 2002).

[5] His-Huey Liang, *The Rise of the Modern Police and the European State System from Metternich to the Second World War* (Cambridge, 1992).

[6] On the brutalization thesis see, among others: George L. Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars* (Oxford, 1990). A similar argument in favour of the 'brutalization thesis'

thesis', once widely endorsed, has come under sustained criticism in recent years, it has not, as yet, been replaced by empirically sound alternative explanations for the widespread escalation of violence after the end of the war.[7] In a cautious attempt to explain the apparent lack of 'brutalization' in the victorious powers of the Great War, Dirk Schumann has recently argued that the relative domestic stability of interwar France and Britain (relative, that is, when measured against the situation in Germany) was partly due to the fact that their violent potential was relieved in the colonies, an option no longer available to Germany after 1918.[8] It remains unclear, however, whether the level of colonial violence in the French and British Empires was greater after the war than before, and the argument presupposes that the war generated a level of personal violence that *had* to be discharged somewhere.

Perhaps a more convincing explanation for the uneven distribution of paramilitary violence in Europe lies in the mobilizing power of defeat. Defeat should be seen not just in terms of the balance of power but also as a state of mind (including the refusal to acknowledge the reversal) which Wolfgang Schivelbusch has termed a 'culture of defeat'.[9] The nation had played a central role during the Great War in organizing and endorsing the mass deployment of violence by millions of European men. By the same token the nation was a potent means of legitimizing, reabsorbing and neutralizing that same violence once the conflict was over. Where the nation had been defeated, however, either in reality or in perception (as with nationalist circles in Italy), it was more difficult for it to play this role; indeed, it may have done precisely the opposite, exacerbating violence and generalizing it to a host of groups and individuals who chose to take it on themselves to redress defeat and national humiliation.[10] The nature of the 'homecoming' in a context of victory or defeat was thus an important variable but one that must be studied empirically on a regional, and not just a national basis. Defeat was infinitely more

was put forward by Adrian Lyttleton, 'Fascism and Violence in Post-War Italy: Political Strategy and Social Conflict', in: Wolfgang J. Mommsen and Gerhard Hirschfeld (eds.), *Social Protest, Violence and Terror* (London, 1982), here 262–3. For a critical view that argues against the usefulness of the concept for France, see Antoine Prost, 'Les Limites de la brutalisation. Tuer sur le front occidental 1914–1918', *Vingtième siècle*, 81 (2000), 5–20. On Britain, see John Laurence, 'Forging a Peaceable Kingdom: War, Violence and Fear of Brutalization in Post-First World War Britain', *Journal of Modern History*, 75 (2003), 557–89.

[7] For Germany in particular, see Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2007); Dirk Schumann, 'Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: Eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?', *Journal of Modern European History* (2003), 24–43. See, too Antoine Prost and Jay Winter (eds.), *The Great War in History: Debates and Controversies, 1914 to the Present* (Cambridge, 2005); Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge, 2009).

[8] Dirk Schumann, 'Europa, der erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit. Eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?', *Journal of Modern European History*, 1 (2003), 23–43.

[9] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Culture of Defeat: On National Trauma, Mourning, and Recovery* (New York, 2003); John Horne, 'Defeat and Memory since the French Revolution: Some Reflections', in: Jenny Macleod (ed.), *Defeat and Memory. Cultural Histories of Military Defeat since 1815* (London, 2008), 11–29.

[10] For the general argument, see Josh Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation. Military Conscription, Total War and Mass Politics, 1905–1925* (DeKalb, Illinois, 2003), 165–200.

real for those who lived in the ethnically diverse border regions of the Central Powers than it was for those in Berlin, Budapest or Vienna and it is no coincidence that young men from these disputed border regions were highly overrepresented in the paramilitary organizations of the postwar years.[11] A recent investigation of the geographical origin of Nazi perpetrators has confirmed that they, too, were disproportionately drawn from the lost territories or contested border regions such as Austria, Alsace, the Baltic countries, the occupied Rhineland or Silesia.[12]

Another prominent concept in historiographical debates relevant to our topic is that of demobilization seen as a political and cultural process rather than a purely military and economic one.[13] 'Cultural demobilization' of course implies a possible refusal or failure to demobilize. The incidence of paramilitarism, and the contexts in which it proved most violent, provide a good means of tracing those states, regions, movements and individuals, especially where the conflict had been lost, which found it hardest to leave the violence of war behind, whether they had experienced it directly as combatants or as adolescents on the home front.[14] The peace of the mid- to late 1920s was relative and short-lived. The legacy of postwar paramilitarism in turn supplies one of the connections between the cycle of European and global violence of 1912–23 and its successor which, on a political and cultural level, began 10 years later.

This book builds on these concepts and debates whilst simultaneously proposing a somewhat different approach to this period than those usually adopted. First, the geographical scale of the violence necessitates a comparative and transnational analysis.[15] As the Great War destroyed the dynastic Empires of Russia, Austria-Hungary and Ottoman Turkey, and created a 'bleeding frontier' in Germany's East, it left 'shatter zones', or large tracts of territory where the disappearance of frontiers created spaces without order or clear state authority.[16] Waves of violence occurred in many of these zones, but not all, and where they did they had identifiable causes

[11] For the complex German case, see Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford, 1993); Benjamin Ziemann, *War Experiences in Rural Germany, 1914–1923* (Oxford, 2007), and Adam R. Seipp, *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917–1921* (Farnham, 2009).

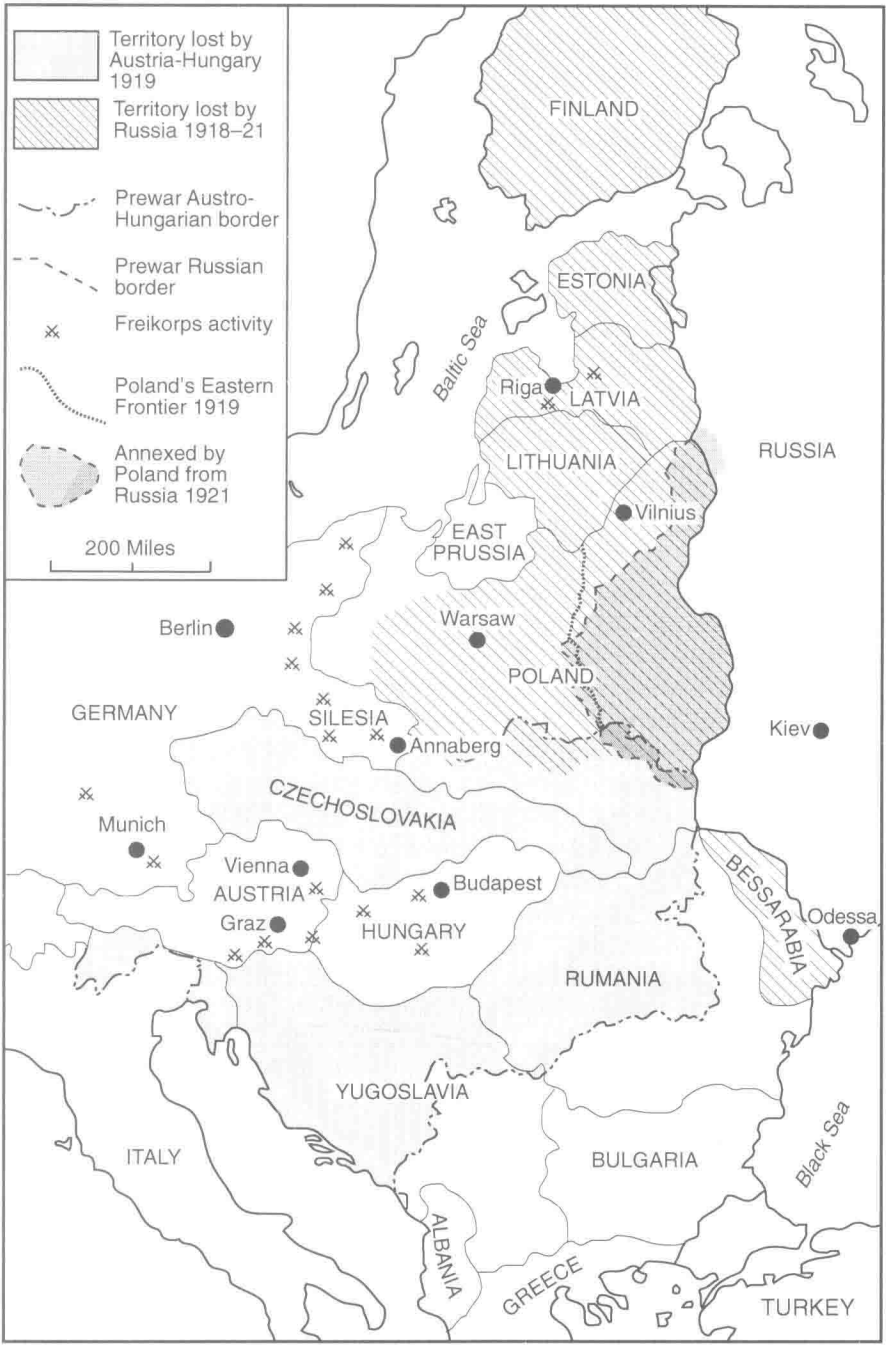
[12] Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (Cambridge, 2005), 239.

[13] For the concept of cultural demobilization, see John Horne (ed.), 'Démobilisations culturelles après la Grande Guerre,' theme issue of *14–18 Aujourd'hui-Heute-Today*, 5 (2002).

[14] For Germany in particular, see Ziemann, *War Experiences*; Dirk Schumann, 'Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: Eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?', *Journal of Modern European History* (2003), 24–43. Also important in this respect is Mark Cornwall's recently completed AHRC-funded project 'Victors and Victims: the Male Wartime Generation in East-Central Europe, 1918–1930', which investigated the ways in which the male generation of the Habsburg Empire that passed through the First World War coped with the wartime sacrifice and the transition to peacetime conditions in a way that complements the recent work of cultural historians on war commemoration and demobilization in individual states in Western Europe in the 1920s.

[15] Despite recent attempts to write transnational histories of the Great War, the global history of its immediate aftermath is yet to be tackled. The most recent attempts at transnational histories of the Great War include Alan Kramer, *Dynamics of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War* (Oxford, 2008). On the global ramifications of the Paris Peace Treaties, see Erez Manela, *The Wilsonian Moment: Self-Determination and the International Origins of Anticolonial Nationalism* (Oxford, 2007).

[16] The term 'shatter zone' was first used by Donald Bloxham, *The Final Solution: A Genocide*, (Oxford, 2009), 81.



Map 1. Freikorps activity in the 'shatter zones' of East Central Europe, 1918–21.

that need to be analysed and compared.[17] The fashionable idea that there are certain inherently violent states in Europe (such as Russia, Yugoslavia or Ireland) and others (such as the 'peaceable kingdom' of Great Britain) which are not, obscures more than it reveals. As all twentieth-century historians would recognize, the 'body count' in some parts of the continent has been vastly higher than in others. But such comparisons make no sense unless one examines the material, ideological, political, and cultural factors which explain that difference. The geography of violence, and in this case of paramilitary violence, is one way to do so.

Secondly the interplay between the short and long-term causes of postwar paramilitary violence requires a temporal approach that breaks the conventional time span of the Great War. The focus on the years 1914–18 makes more sense for the victorious 'Western front powers' (Britain, France, the USA), than it does for much of Central-Eastern and South-Eastern Europe or Ireland. The paroxysm of 1914–18 was the epicentre of a cycle of armed conflict that in some parts of Europe began in 1912, with the formation of paramilitary forces in Ulster determined to preserve the Union with Britain, and the first two Balkan wars that reduced Ottoman power to a toe-hold in Europe before setting Bulgaria against its former allies over Macedonia and Thrace.[18] The violence continued until 1923, when the Treaty of Lausanne defined the territory of the new Turkish Republic and ended Greek territorial ambitions in Asia Minor with the largest forced exchange of populations before the Second World War.[19] The end of the Irish Civil War in the same year, the restoration of a measure of equilibrium in Germany after the occupation of the Ruhr and the confirmation of the New Economic Policy on Lenin's death in 1924 were further indications that the cycle of violence had run its course.

Thirdly, the period from 1917 was marked by the articulation of competing ideologies that by 1923 had taken shape in new states and in the system of European international relations. Here, too, the origins lay much further back, as far as the 1870s, a decade of rapid cultural, socio-economic and political change. The transitions to new forms of mass politics that occurred in much of Europe with the franchise reforms of the 1870s and the emergence of mass movements around democratization, socialism and nationalism marked a durable change in the terms of European politics and intellectual debate. Revolutionary socialism and syndicalism challenged a parliamentary democracy that was far from established as the predominant state form. New variants of nationalism (sometimes democratic in flavour, sometimes overtly hostile to liberal democracy) triggered internal crises in the Ottoman, Romanov and Habsburg Empires, whose governments in turn

[17] For an overview of the ethnic violence attendant on the collapse of the multi-ethnic empires, see Aviel Roshwald, *Ethnic Nationalism and the Fall of Empires: Central Europe, Russia and the Middle East, 1914–1923* (London, 2001). For the chaos and violence in the Russian countryside, see Sanborn, *Drafting the Russian Nation*, 170–83.

[18] Richard Hall, *The Balkan Wars, 1912–1913: Prelude to the First World War* (London, 2000); Wolfgang Höpken, 'Performing Violence: Soldiers, Paramilitaries and Civilians in the Twentieth-Century Balkan Wars', in: Alf Lüdtke, Bernd Weisbrod, and Richard Bessel (eds.), *No Man's Land of Violence: Extreme Wars in the 20th Century* (Göttingen, 2006), 211, 249.

[19] Ryan Gingeras, *Sorrowful Shores: Violence, Ethnicity and the End of the Ottoman Empire, 1912–1923* (Oxford, 2009).