VIOLENCE AND TRAUMA
Experiencing the two World Wars

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Abstract

The chapter focuses on the cultural history of martial violence in Europe in the age of the two World Wars. During the First World War, 'shell shock' became a catchword for the mental consequences of industrialized massacre. The chapter explores the question of war neurosis and its legacy. The problem of mentally surviving violence has remained a key impetus for cultural historical approaches to the Great War. The chapter analyses the different ramifications and cultural meanings of violence and concludes by discussing genocidal war, the Holocaust and the catastrophes of the Eastern Front in the Second World War.

In her famous study on pain, Elaine Scarry notes the difficulty of describing pain accurately. Despite its corporeality, the feeling of pain resists objectification in language; and even more, it deconstructs the language that we use to share our experiences socially. Torturous pain remains confined to bodies that suffer it. Yet the pain's 'unmaking of the world' is accompanied by the richness of practices, meanings, rituals and artefacts that surround the experiences of violence – the body in pain is also a source of culture that 'makes the world'. Importantly, Scarry dedicates the second chapter of her book to war, and especially to recognizing war as a fundamentally violent event. This sobering recognition contrasts with vast quantities of military and political history on war, in which the violence at war's root is rarely acknowledged:

> The main purpose and outcome of war is injuring. Though this fact is too self-evident and massive ever to be directly contested, it can be indirectly contested by many means and disappear from view along many separate paths. It may disappear from view simply by being omitted: one can read many pages of a historic or strategic account of a particular military campaign, or listen to many successive installments in a newscast narrative of events in a contemporary war, without encountering the acknowledgment that the purpose of the event described is to alter (to burn, to blast, to shell, to cut) human tissue, as well as to alter the surface, shape, and deep entirety of the objects human beings recognize as extensions of themselves.[1]

These are the simple points of departure for the current chapter: (1) war is violence, (2) violence destroys cultural meanings and (3) violence calls for cultural meanings. Furthermore, I will add a fourth point of departure: unlike individual acts of violence, violence in war is in direct relation to collective identities. In order to sustain the war effort and to cherish a societally cohesive memory of the war, martial violence

must be given regenerative meanings; should this fail, the violence of war has the ability to shatter and mould those cultural beliefs and narratives that are crucial for the self-understanding of a given community.[2] Taken together, these four points underline the tension between violence and culture as both a destructive and a productive force – and help to understand why war has such a central place in cultural imagination, even after decades of peace in many Western countries. Against this backdrop, I will discuss the cultural history of martial violence in Europe during the age of the two World Wars.

Cultural means of survival, 1914–18

The average calculation of military deaths during the First World War is around 10 million soldiers. To this we should add several million war-related civilian deaths, the exact number of which is hard to estimate. All this human slaughter was in stark contrast both to the progressive ethos of civilization in the pre-war era and to the popular expectations of a short and glorious war in August 1914. In November 1918, four great empires were in ruins and the victorious nations had suffered such a monstrous death toll that the victory itself was hardly a sufficient compensation. Yet alongside such devastation, many frontline soldiers gave witness to enduring patriotism. As Etienne Derville, a sergeant in the French Army and a student in a Catholic university, wrote in a letter after being wounded twice at the turn of 1914–15:

> In full conscience, I have made the sacrifice of my life, with joy, for the rechristianization of our country, for the greater love of God on the part of my parents and my friends, and I do not feel the least bitterness.[3]

The cultural historiography of 1914–18 could have several first entries, but literary scholar Paul Fussell's *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975) is a safe classic. Despite its title, the book has relatively little in common with memory studies. As Fussell wrote in his preface, if the study had a subtitle, it would be called 'An Inquiry into the Curious Literariness of Real Life'. The book's central research question rose from the horrors of war: how was it possible to experience all that violence with any meaning? What consequences did this have? To answer these questions, Fussell showed how the British soldiers used 'arcadian resources' and other literary means to survive the war and to preserve some form of agency. Their war experiences were transformed into language and literature and generated the modern era. To Fussell this meant the birth of a fundamentally ironic relation to the world, born out of the discrepancy between the horrors of the trenches and the elegiac language used to describe them.[4] Referring to the curious habit of equating war with theatre in public discourses and literary accounts, Fussell commented thus on the soldiers' own experiences:

Those who actually fought the war tended to leave the inviting analogy to Greek or any other kind of tragedy to the journalists. On the spot, it looked less like a tragedy than like a melodrama, a farce, or a music-hall turn. Or even a school-pageant played by enthusiastic but unprepared boy actors impersonating soldiers, trying to look like Tennysonian heroes.[5]

In one of the brutal paradoxes of the twentieth century, the war that allegedly gave birth to the modern mentality started as an escape from modernity. Historian Eric J. Leed captured this paradox in his impressive cultural history of experiencing industrialized violence on the Western Front. In August 1914, men and women celebrated the outbreak of war as a return to heroism, chivalric virtues and national unity. German playwright Carl Zuckmayer, for example, experienced the declaration of war as a liberation from the pettiness of bourgeois family life: the war was a great sport full of Romantic emotions. Entering 'the labyrinth' of the trenches at the turn of 1914–15, the soldiers encountered an altogether different world, characterized by the absurdity and randomness of extreme violence. They tried (and often managed) to survive this world by transforming their identity to match the liminal, subterranean circumstances of their existence and by resorting to various cultural repertoires of myth, ritual and fantasy. Next to death and mutilation, the war neurosis was an attempt to exit the intolerable realities of the front. Similar to Fussell – but drawing rather from cultural anthropology and psychology than from literary studies – to Leed the war was a modernizing experience. It meant disillusionment with traditional ways of thinking and an internalization of war itself as a new mentality.[6]

One of the main endeavours in cultural history that helps explain frontline soldiers' remarkable ability to endure the war's hardships has been the study of masculinities. Advocating emphasis on bodies, historian Joanna Bourke studied the British soldiers' corporeal experiences in 1914–18. Male bodies at war were a site of violence, resistance, comradely bonding, malingering, shock and memory.[7] As historian Jason Crouthamel has shown, the harsh frontline conditions could actually allow for such forms of male intimacy that would have otherwise been considered inappropriate and 'unmanly' – and such outlets of 'divergent' masculinity could foster emotional comfort in the midst of violence. Open homosexuality remained a problematic issue, but the ideal of comradeship and close emotional bonds between men allowed for more freedom to express attraction. 'When we didn't go out of an evening, we dismissed the servants and sat for a long time arm in arm, in close embrace, saying many tender and lovely things to each other, spinning golden for the future and building beautiful castles in the air', wrote a German officer of his love relationship to another officer.[8]

Manliness was a cultural resource at the soldiers' disposal; it included the national ideals and stereotypes of a soldier-hero as well as a multitude of less programmatic male roles from domestic middle-class masculinities to deviant working-class lads. When one reads the soldiers' war narratives, the frontline experience turns more ambivalent than a story of mere terror and disillusionment. Both Leonard V.

Smith's study on French soldiers and Jessica Meyer's study on British soldiers came to a similar conclusion: the war changed men, often dramatically and violently, but the soldiers were still able to attach many positive or ambiguous qualities to their experiences as the 'real men of the front'. They were also able to use many traditional narratives of soldiering to experience the war as meaningful.[9] According to Alexander Watson's close comparative analysis of the British and German frontline cultures in 1914–18, 'resilience not collapse was the norm among men on the Western Front'. Even much of the initial patriotism that motivated the soldiers in 1914 actually survived the following four years, albeit in a more down-to-earth style.[10]

Although the homosocial bonds among the soldiers were clearly one of the main sources of their mental endurance, the wartime male–female relations provided further support. Most of the soldiers were very young, and their closest relatives were still their parents. Mothers (and to some extent fathers) took on a role as 'emotional containers', who absorbed the fears and insecurities of their sons at the front and returned them back in a more tolerable form, as Michael Roper's insightful analysis of British soldiers' letter correspondence has shown.[11] Christine E. Hallett's work on nurses of the Great War reveals the same function of female support and encouragement to the wounded and dying men – but also the appallingly traumatic conditions that the nurses themselves had to face in the casualty clearing stations and field hospitals. As Australian nursing sister Elsie May Tranter wrote in her diary on the Western Front in France, May 1917: 'Today I had to assist at ten (10) amputations one after another. It is frightfully nerve-wracking work. I seem to hear that wretched saw at work whenever I try to sleep […] How these boys do suffer!'[12]

The question of surviving violence mentally has remained a key impetus for cultural historical approaches to the Great War. The power of cultural imagination and practices to resist violence and to make it endurable seems to offer a comforting narrative against the backdrop of war's terror. There is, nevertheless, a dark side to this, as Joanna Bourke's cultural history of killing in war underlines. Instead of fear and hate, love of one's fellow soldiers and homefolks was the main motivator that kept the soldiers committing violence, not only surviving it. Human ability to feel attachment and empathy thus made the violence possible. And killing in war was not only a cause for disgust and regret but could also be a matter of indifference and even pleasure. Bourke notes how, during the two World Wars, 'psychiatrists recognized that more men broke down in war because they were *not* allowed to kill than under the strain of killing'.[13]

This remains a controversial issue, and it seems to be an overstatement that acts of violence could actually protect a person mentally.[14] Yet Bourke makes an important contribution by emphasizing the disturbingly positive emotions provoked by the war experience. In addition to survivors and victims, the perpetrators of violence were also using cultural resources to experience their deeds as justifiable and

meaningful. One of the main functions of cultural practices was to make the act of killing easier and more tolerable:

> Killing itself could be seen as an act of carnival: combat gear, painted faces, and the endless refrain that men had to turn into 'animals' were the martial equivalent of the carnival mask: they enabled men to invert the moral order while still remaining innocent and committed to that order. Pranks involving enemy bodies were very common in all three conflicts [the First and Second World Wars and Vietnam].[15]

Histories of shell shock and war neurosis

All the studies above also discuss the opposite phenomenon to mental coping: the experience of mental breakdown. Every country that sent soldiers to major combat in 1914–18 had to face the psychological casualties of war. In Great Britain, 'shell shock' had become a catchword for the mental consequences of industrialized massacre already in 1915, and the same happened in France and Germany with their own definitions of war neurosis. Everywhere, both the medical officers and soldiers were puzzled by the emergence of these invisible wounds: some British frontline doctors used the acronym 'GOK' (God Only Knows) for diagnosing their shocked patients.[16] Today, a mentally broken soldier or ex-serviceman is an iconic image of the First World War, inserted in every film or TV series about the war. It is thus surprising to see that the first historical studies specifically on shell shock appeared quite late, at the beginning of the 2000s. But by then the growing interest in shell shock resulted in an avalanche of research, in which cultural history has been the main venue of investigation.

This trend began in 2000 when the *Journal of Contemporary History* published a theme issue on the comparative cultural history of shell shock. Based on a conference in Péronne in 1998, the issue included a keynote by George L. Mosse (1918–99) that turned out to be the last publication of one of the most influential cultural historians of war, masculinity and nationalism. Here, by emphasizing the special relation between soldiers' mental breakdowns and the collective perceptions of manliness, Mosse set the agenda for much of the forthcoming research: 'Shattered nerves and lack of will-power were the enemies of settled society and because men so afflicted were thought to be effeminate, they endangered the clear distinction between genders which was generally regarded as an essential cement of society'.[17] If the image of a soldier-man was fundamental to national self-perception and cultural cohesion in war-waging countries, then the image of a shell-shocked soldier carried with it the stigma of national weakness and degeneration. 'One day the authorities will wake up and realize what a great social danger the war hysterics represent', wrote German military psychiatrist Ernst Rittershaus in 1919, after the German defeat in the First World War.[18]

Both the above-mentioned theme issue and a collected volume entitled *Traumatic Pasts: History, Psychiatry, and Trauma in the Modern Age, 1870–1930* that soon followed it shared a comparative aim: was shell shock really a universal experience of the First World War, or was it rather a particularly British concept? As the contributors to *Traumatic Pasts* showed, there was indeed a general 'Western' genealogy to trauma in the intertwined development of modern psychiatry, the age of industry and new societal policies. In addition, the similarities in war experiences – the violent dominance of artillery fire and the passive trench warfare – created parallel experiences of war neurosis. Yet the medical responses and cultural perceptions of the phenomenon varied from country to country; there was no single 'culture of shell shock' to be found. A crucial contribution by cultural history to the ongoing discussions on mental trauma has been to underline the great varieties of trauma experiences and responses. Historical studies on trauma cannot take the contemporary psychiatric definition of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for granted. As Paul Lerner and Mark Micale, the editors of *Traumatic Pasts*, wrote in 2001:

> If it proves impossible to write a single, unilinear history of trauma, it is altogether possible to write histories of traumata, or accounts of the multiple contexts of self, science and society that have given meaning to past traumatic experience. We envision writing the 'history of trauma' as the discovery, recovery and reconstruction of these past worlds of meaning.[19]

The first two monographs focusing solely on the cultural history of war neurosis appeared soon afterwards. Peter Leese studied the birth of shell shock as a frontline experience and a medical category as well as its popular understanding and legacy in Great Britain during and after the Great War.[20] Paul Lerner wrote the history of traumatic neurosis in Germany from the end of the nineteenth century to the last years of the Weimar Republic.[21] Both of these works recognized the political aspect of war trauma: as a new and disputed category, war neurosis became an object of conflicting interpretations among psychiatrists, army officers, politicians, journalists and authors. The victory of one interpretation over others came to have very concrete consequences for the victims of war neurosis and their relatives, for instance in the form of psychiatric treatment, pension policy and general attitude towards the traumatized veterans. Thus, although the British military pension system allowed for war-invalid compensations for the 'shell-shocked' soldiers, the 'pensioning officers never relaxed their attempt to prove that mentally ill men were liars and malingerers', as Joanna Bourke has written.[22]

The growing focus on war trauma in research has brought new attention to post-war societies as 'post-traumatic societies'. As the symbols of war's mentally devastating violence, the war neurotics remained a question to be solved after 1918: they required medical care, applied for pensions, needed jobs and sometimes sought to publish their experiences in books and other artworks. Generally speaking, and although there were considerable national differences, the post-war societies replied to this presence of war trauma with silencing, marginalization and sometimes outright violence (most notably in the

National Socialist Germany, but also elsewhere). Traumatized ex-servicemen's and their relatives' fight for recognition – and often the vanity of this fight – has produced fine cultural and social historical scholarship.[23]

The keen interest in the traumatic dimension of martial violence over the last two decades may relate to a huge cultural shift in Western societies: for most Europeans and Americans, war has become an anomaly in their everyday life, something belonging to a past world. The contemporary diagnosis of PTSD is an offspring of the anti-Vietnam War movements in the 1960s and 1970s, and thus it includes a moral statement about the fundamentally destructive nature of martial violence – the opposite of the earlier normative ideals of stoic manliness. In the same way, the study of historical war traumas has rejected the idea of war as something natural, rational and heroic. In the next phase of research, the trauma perspective should reach outside the Western (Front) contexts and towards the experiences of war-affected civilians.[24] At the same time, it is important to note that despite the wide societal changes, the experience of mental breakdown is often still considered shameful. 'The John Wayne figure – tough, stoic, brave and seemingly invincible – still constitutes the manly ideal for much of Canadian and North American society, especially in the military', Adam Montgomery summarizes in his history of war trauma in the Canadian military.[25]

Cultures after violence

'Never such innocence again', poet Philip Larkin concluded his 1964 poem *MCMXIV*, in reference to a photograph of young men lining up in a recruiting station in August 1914.[26] Together with the means of survival and the history of shell shock, the third cultural historical emphasis on the First World War has been to study the war's consequences on the post-war culture. Here we return to Paul Fussell's influential thesis on the Great War as the cradle of modernity. The issue at stake has had two main features. First, did the war experience of 1914–18 produce such a profound breakage that the old pre-1914 world really died in the trenches and a new, distinctly different modern world was born? Second, did the experience directly cause an even more violent apocalypse: the Second World War and the Holocaust?

The idea of fundamental rupture in 1914–18 with the earlier culture and civilization is a dramatic narrative that currently permeates the popular understanding of the Great War. The idea is championed by literary scholar Samuel Hynes, who in 1990 drew on Fussell's thesis in his analysis of post-war British literature. From this perspective, the war experience meant betrayed idealism, bitterness, cynicism and resentment; even the alienated survivors of the war counted as its casualties. At the end of his monumental study Hynes saw the world of 1990 as still the descendant of the First World War:

> In our reality, here at the century's end, the First World War remains a powerful imaginative force, perhaps the most powerful force, in the shaping not only of our conceptions of what war is, but of the world we live in – a world in which that war, and all the wars that have followed it, were possible human acts. Our world begins with that war.[27]

Similar observations on the war's radical consequences have been made in relation to cinema and other arts, in addition to literature.[28] There was no return to the culture and mentality of the pre-war era.

Yet this interpretation of breakage has not gone uncontested. If one lowers one's sight from high culture to the popular imaginations of the First World War, the picture seems to be quite different than that of a profound disillusionment. Jay Winter, one of the most prominent cultural historians of the First World War and its memory, showed how the war made people seek meaning and consolation for their violent losses by returning to religion, tradition and pastoral images. War experience could cause a language shift away from naïve patriotism, but it did not cause a wholesale breakage. In fact, there was a revival and persistence of tradition after the war. People in the aftermath were characterized by their 'backward gaze', not by their radical breakaway with the past. Analysing the war poetry of 1914–18, Winter concluded:

> The soldier-poet was in the end a romantic figure. […] It was (and remains) his voice which reaffirmed the values of the men who fought, their loyalty to one another, their compassion for those who suffered on both sides, their stoical acceptance of fate. At times, he expressed outrage at the injustice at the young being slaughtered while the old looked on. But most of this body of verse was an affirmation, even when cataloguing the awfulness of war.[29]

It was only after 1945 that the classical, romantic and sacred visions of war vanished. Another question is whether the experience of 1914–18 produced a specifically brutal political culture and mentality that then gave birth to fascism and Nazism. In *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the World Wars*, George L. Mosse formulated a thesis that the modern warfare, frontline comradeship and massive amount of death on behalf of the nation in the First World War initiated a 'myth of war experience', which cherished a new type of violent, hypermasculine warrior ideal. Taking the German frontline officer and author Ernst Jünger as his paradigmatic example, Mosse described a novel storm trooper of the trenches, who was merciless and tough to the extreme – and ready to annihilate his enemies even after the war. To these men, the war did not end in November 1918 but continued ever on as a state of mind. In defeated Germany, such men sought national and personal regeneration through violence and elimination of inner enemies. This led to the general brutalization of German politics and paved the way for Hitler. For Jünger in 1922, for example, 'poetry is now written out of steel and the struggle for power in battle'.[30]

When the soldiers returned home, the fear of violence and brutalization was quite widespread among the war-waging countries. Moreover, it has been argued that also in Great Britain the collectively traumatic violence of 1914–18 would have led to both real and imagined violence against those perceived

as 'un-English' during the post-war years, to a kind of 'fascistic sensibility'.[31] This remains a controversial claim, and in fact there is important evidence quite to the contrary: in Great Britain the war experience led to an unforeseen wave of pacifism and to the cultural model of 'peaceable' and 'tempered' masculinity.[32] The same was true for France, as Antoine Prost has shown: 'However, this conception of politics as the continuation of war was peculiar to Germany. French ex-soldiers, on the contrary, insisted on the duty to make home politics more peaceful'.[33] Accordingly, there was no direct connection between the frontline experience and the brutalization of politics as such; the roots of Nazism had to be in a specifically German combination of cultural and societal traditions, the war experience and the post-war developments.

In any case, the continuation of violence after 1918 was the reality for most Europeans. In Germany and in East and Central Europe the chaotic post-war mayhem gave rise to a new paramilitary culture of violence, perpetrated by armed bands and militias.[34] Klaus Theweleit's psycho-cultural analysis of the German Freikorps officers remains an original classic in the field, although its psychoanalytical orientation and generalized conclusions are open to criticism.[35] Recently, historian Mark Jones has studied the same 'culture of violence' during the German revolution of 1918–19. Although his methodology is completely different from Theweleit's, the conclusions have similarities. Using the Freikorps as its instrument of power, the emerging German state was founded on an unprecedented orgy of violence. This was a full reversal of a long-term reduction of state violence in Germany. For the new state, violence was a means of communicating its power and authority – and even though these practices cannot derive their origin directly from the frontlines of 1914–18, they indeed gave cultural and political legitimacy to the forthcoming Nazi violence at the end of the Weimar Republic. An important notion in Jones's work is that violence is not only an instrument of power with cultural consequences; as a 'culture of violence' it is a cultural phenomenon in itself.[36]

The shattering of earlier state formations and the outbursts of unlimited violence in and after 1918 were naturally linked to military defeats in the First World War. The vacuum of power after all the restraints and sacrifices during the war years tends to bring to the fore a special mode of spontaneity, hedonism and even peculiar euphoria before the harsh new realities make themselves felt, as cultural historian Wolfgang Schivelbusch has written. In this eschatological 'dreamland' the violence may easily turn against former authorities as the scapegoats for defeat. The long-term impact of defeat is the difficulty to attach sustainable meaning to all the human losses in war, which are in danger of losing their character as beneficial sacrifices on behalf of the nation. In this way, the violence of war haunts the post-war societies and challenges the key cultural meanings of national self-image.[37]

Cultural histories of a genocidal war?

From the 1970s onwards, the First World War has served as a treasury of topics for the new cultural history. The field has flourished with rich cultural interpretations, novel methodologies, fruitful controversies and bold hypotheses. This stems from the profoundly *cultural* aspect of the war's violence either as a cultural rupture or as evidence of cultural tradition's and imagination's ability to survive the violence.

Turning one's attention to the Second World War reveals a remarkable difference. Although the cultural turn in historical scholarship has self-evidently affected also the study of 1939–45, the role of cultural history is by no means as dominant here as in studying the First World War. Political, social, economic and military history are still the mainstream ways of narrating the history of the Second World War. Perhaps symptomatically, Paul Fussell's follow-up book *Wartime*, which extended his analysis of 1914–18 to 1939–45, never gained the same influence as *The Great War and Modern Memory*.[38] A cultural and literary analysis of the Second World War does not seem to have the same scholarly relevance and potential that it had for the previous war.

Why is this so? One essential explanation may be found in the thoroughly ideological nature of the Second World War. This was a war of manipulative top-down propaganda, with less room for individuals and communities to formulate their own understanding of the war. Discussing this issue in their introduction to the third volume of *The Cambridge History of the Second World War* in 2015, Michael Geyer and Adam Tooze gave the following answer:

> war cultures in the Second World War were distinctly more programmatic and were more keenly organized, and more vigorous in their determination to deliver real benefits and results [than in the First World War]. This was as true of Hitler's Germany as it was of the war effort of New Deal America.[39]

The second reason relates to the nature of violence. As horrible as the First World War was, it did not reach the murderous scale and quality of the Holocaust and the war in the east in 1941–45. In relation to the deliberate genocide of European Jews and Romany, cultural explanations may have felt out of place and even inappropriate. As historians from the 1960s onwards wrestled with the Holocaust, it was considered most important to establish the key events of the genocide and the actual decision-making processes that led to it. This was an inquiry into politics, bureaucracy, exploitation and logistics rather than cultural systems of meaning. Furthermore, the relativist standpoint as well as the diversity of interpretations – both hallmarks of cultural history – may have been ill-suited to approach the calculated murder of millions of unarmed civilians. As historian Dan Stone has noted in an important essay on this topic, cultural interpretations of Nazism have been seminal for the understanding of radical anti-Semitism and racial ideology; but regarding the actual murder process, the influence of cultural history is yet to

emerge. However, the cultural history of racism and Nazi imagination as a basis for violence is a necessary explanatory addition to Holocaust studies.[40]

The (forthcoming) cultural history of the Holocaust is closely related to the cultural history of violence on the Eastern Front, 1941–45. Just as with the Holocaust, the ideological character of the 'war of annihilation' in the east has required cultural interpretations. Omer Bartov's study on Nazism and the German Army showed how the cultural models of 'Jewish-Bolshevist barbarism' were deeply rooted in the ordinary German soldiers' perceptions of the war in the east – and how these perceptions led to both brutal atrocities and the ideological cohesion of the German Army in the face of towering human losses. 'The Jew is a real master in murdering, burning and massacring […] These bandits deserve the worst and toughest punishment conceivable', wrote a German lance-corporal on the Eastern Front in 1941 – and thus justified the murdering, burning and massacring by the German troops.[41] Thomas Kühne's cultural-ideological analysis of the German concept and experience of soldierly *Kameradschaft* from 1914 onwards came to similar conclusions. Comradeship was not only a safe haven in the midst of violence; especially in the latter years of the Second World War, it was itself the motor of violence:

> Comradeship denoted inclusion, belonging, solidarity, and togetherness, but its reality depended on its opposite, the Other, the foe – exclusion. The Other could be the overwhelming enemy soldier or the denigrated enemy civilian. Terror generated tenderness, destruction enabled cohesion. And vice versa. Producing togetherness, even if only once in a while, enabled the soldiers to cope with the omnipresence of death and devastation they faced in their war of annihilation.[42]

The function and cultural practices of comradeship were similar in the Red Army, too: they enabled the Soviet soldiers to endure and commit violence. And as demonstrated by Catherine Merridale's study, the Communist regime tried to control and define soldiers' social bonds. Both in the Wehrmacht and in the Red Army, the close circle of fellow soldiers could allow a considerable degree of dissidence and resistance against the official ideology. But in the end, these primary groups fought to the extremes for the sake of their totalitarian regimes. Merridale's rich cultural inspection of everyday life in the Red Army returns us to the beginning of this chapter, to the power of cultural practices in coping with the violence of war. The role of religion, for example, was ambiguous: in order to survive the battle and to find consolation, the soldiers of the atheist Soviet state resorted to prayers and carried small crosses, but probably rather out of superstition and ritualistic practice than out of actual Orthodox faith.[43]

Advancing to enemy territory, both the German Army and the Red Army soldiers committed acts of sexual violence. And when the Allied forces liberated the countries occupied by Germany, the local people took revenge by publicly shaming and punishing those women who had had relationships with the Germans. Sexual and gendered violence seems to be connected to the mental and cultural mindscape of war, whereby women are seen simultaneously as 'war bounty', as the warriors' prizes, and as ones to be protected by soldier-men. As Susan Gubar noted in 1987, war promotes misogyny, which is not

restricted to the women on the 'enemy side' but tends to sexualize and objectify women at large. The risks and sacrifices of men at the front were juxtaposed with the real or imagined safety and comfort of women at home.[44]

Furthermore, the experience of total war transformed the gender order both concretely and symbolically: women stepped into 'manly' spheres of production and bread-winning, sexual morals loosened and the former masculine soldier-heroes returned home as beaten men. Post-war sexual politics and the restoration of 'normality' after the violence have been important topics for cultural history.[45]

If the emblematic icon of the First World War today is the shell-shocked soldier, for the Second World War the Holocaust retains many of the same ethical judgements about the immorality, destructiveness and vanity of war. Consequently, it seems, the mentally wounded soldier of 1939–45 does not seem to have the same cultural potency to symbolize the war as his peer in 1914–18. For Germany in the 1940s and 1950s, though, the defeated masculinity of the former Wehrmacht and SS soldiers was a powerful cultural image. Returning from foreign captivity, these men epitomized the bankruptcy of the Nazi warrior cult. Disturbing and effeminate as they may have been, the veterans' broken appearances served an important function for the German post-war culture: they turned the Germans from perpetrators to victims of violence. Religious motifs helped to refashion the former soldiers in the war of extermination to Christ-like figures, who – returning from the Soviet prison camps – wore a 'crown of thorns made out of barbed wire'.[46] Yet the ex-soldiers' moral burdens and traumatic experiences continued to haunt their post-war lives, as Svenja Goltermann's reading of the West German psychiatric patient files has shown. The public discourse for these experiences was missing, but the bodies and minds still carried the memory of violence.[47]

In order to fully grasp the massively traumatic legacy of the Second World War, the future focus must shift from soldiers to civilians and from Western to Eastern Europe – and further to Asia. The most murderous violence of the Second World War in Europe took place in the east: in the area from Berlin to Moscow and from Leningrad to the Black Sea, which historian Timothy Snyder has coined with the term 'bloodlands'.[48] Here (as well as globally), the civilian casualties far exceeded the military casualties. It is in fact one of the paradoxes in historical trauma studies that the trauma discourses have developed mostly in those Western countries which have – proportionately speaking – suffered the least of the massive violence of the twentieth century. The first initiatives to expand the cultural history of trauma and violence to civilians and to the east have been taken, and the results are promising.[49] As far as I see, it is here that the history of the Second World War may provide a crucial narrative of its own to supplement and possibly challenge the powerful shell-shock paradigm of 1914–18.

Concluding remarks

Does the cultural history of the two World Wars differ from the cultural history of violence in 1914–45? As we have seen, much of the former has been about the experiences and consequences of violence, although these studies have not been conceptualized as the latter. Yet every now and then, I think an explicit cultural analysis of martial violence is useful in cleansing one's lenses from all the 'fog of war' and in sharpening the focus on the essentials of collective violence and culture. Every war is an assault on human tissue and human minds; every war both destroys and creates culture. In war, the lethal violence that is severely tabooed and sanctioned in inter-personal relations is a legitimate form of inter-state conduct. To make sense of this paradox – to give regenerative meanings to industrialized violence as well as to survive it – has been a major cultural effort which has shaped the conditions of modernity, from gender identities to national sentiments and from state bureaucracies to poetry. It continues to call for critical cultural historical analysis.

Over the nineteenth century – in the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars – all-male conscript armies were established in most European countries. They turned out to be one of the most destructive inventions of humankind, enabling mobilization and warfare on an unforeseen scale. For the cultural history of violence, the age of World Wars introduced two terrorizing novelties: industrialized genocide and the massive use of indirect fire in warfare. Regarding the latter, the development started with the heavy artillery barrages and gas attacks at the frontlines of the First World War and was then followed by strategic air bombing campaigns in the Second World War. In the form of shells and bombs, death from the skies rained upon soldiers and civilians alike and reduced them to passive objects of violence. The Holocaust and the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki brought the violence of war to such extremes that there seemed to be little room for glorious soldiering. Although the European conscript armies remained in place until the end of the Cold War (and some of them until today), in Western Europe the heyday of heroic citizen-soldier masculinities as well as the culture of martial violence was over in 1945.[50] For the rest of the world, the story is different and does not allow itself to be encompassed only as past history: the violence of war is still unmaking and making the world.

If we look at the first half of the European twentieth century as the age of martial violence, the cultural historical perspective may be best suited to analyse the differences. Just as there was no single 'culture of shell shock' in 1914–18, cultural historians must underline the great variations in the nature of violence, in its cultural framing, and in coming to terms with it. This is a matter not only of separate national histories, but of differences among smaller communities, social groups and individuals. At the same time, cultural historians would do well to look also for similarities and conjunctions in the experiences and cultures of violence. In the spirit of transnational historiography, for example the cultural

histories of artillery fire, foreign occupation or war-related nightmares would definitely warrant research: these were fundamental experiences of the twentieth century for tens of millions of people, notwithstanding their nationalities. In fact, and perhaps a bit surprisingly, here the 'traditional' military histories of the Second World War as the first truly global conflict may lead the way for the cultural historians to follow.[51]

Notes

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