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The Central European Counter-Revolution: Paramilitary Violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War
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THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN COUNTER-REVOLUTION: PARAMILITARY VIOLENCE IN GERMANY, AUSTRIA AND HUNGARY AFTER THE GREAT WAR*

I

In late 1922, following the assassination of German Foreign Minister Walther Rathenau by members of the ultra-nationalist terror organization Consul, the communist Reichstag delegate Paul Fröhlich published his book *Wider den weißen Mord* (Against the White Terror), with which he wished to contribute to the ongoing debate about the nature of counter-revolutionary violence in post-war Central Europe.¹ Three years after the bloody suppression of the so-called Spartacist Uprising in Berlin, the crushing of the Munich Soviet republic by German and Austrian Freikorps, and the fall of the communist Béla Kun regime in Hungary, Fröhlich’s book aimed to explain the endurance of paramilitary violence and nationalist terror in the defeated states of Central Europe. Following the failure of communist uprisings in Central Europe, this wave of ultra-nationalist violence claimed tens of thousands of lives, including those of prominent politicians and public intellectuals such as Walther Rathenau, Matthias Erzberger, Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the Austrian novelist Hugo Bettauer, the Hungarian journalist Béla Bacsó, and the editor of the Hungarian Social Democratic daily *Népszava*, Béla Somogyi.²

* Preliminary variants of this article were patiently heard by audiences at the universities of Amsterdam, Edinburgh, Harvard and Western Australia in 2005 and 2006. I am extremely grateful for the comments I received. I would especially like to thank Volker Berghahn, Martin Conway, Robert Evans, Mark Levene and Stephan Malinowski for their critical reactions to earlier versions. Not least, my warmest thanks are owing to the British Academy, the Harry Frank Guggenheim Foundation and the IRCHSS, whose generosity allowed me to undertake research for this essay.


² The exact number of deaths inflicted by post-war paramilitary violence is still disputed. Most difficult to establish is the number of casualties inflicted by paramilitary

(contin. on p. 176)

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Fröhlich’s book offered an interesting perspective on the ultra-nationalist ‘White Terror’: he suggested that the counter-revolutionary movements of Central Europe would be imperfectly understood if they were viewed in an exclusively national context. Just like the wave of socialist revolutions in post-war Central Europe, the subsequent counter-revolution was, Fröhlich argued, a truly international affair, based on a close co-operation between ‘Horthy and Ludendorff, the current dictator of Hungary and the future dictator of Germany, [who] have developed military plans of action for the international counter-revolution’. Fröhlich’s views were shared by many representatives of the political left. The former Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Otto Bauer, for example, told the 1920 party congress of the Austrian Social Democrats: ‘we all know that from Bavaria and Hungary attempts are being supported to form here [in Austria] the reactionary Heimwehren, to arm and to organize them, to prepare an army for counter-revolution’.

Such accusations cannot easily be dismissed as left-wing propaganda. Ever since the military collapse of the Central European empires in November 1918 and the subsequent revolutions in Berlin, Budapest and Vienna, the counter-revolutionary movements of Germany, Austria and Hungary were in constant and direct contact, supporting each other with arms and logistics in units in the Baltic States (1919) and Upper Silesia (1919–21). Roughly 30,000 volunteers for the Baltic campaign died within a few months, and the death toll among their opponents must have been significantly higher, perhaps as high as 100,000. See Bernhard Sauer, ‘Vom “Mythos des ewigen Soldatentums”: der Feldzug deutscher Freikorps im Baltikum im Jahre 1919’, Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, xlii (1995). For Hungary, a member of the 1918 Károlyi government, Oszkár Jászi, estimated that the counter-revolution claimed the lives of at least 4,000 victims, but this figure has recently been revised downwards to 1,500. See Oszkár Jászi, Revolution and Counter-Revolution in Hungary after the First World War, East European Quart., xxxviii (2004), 167. For Austria, Gerhard Botz has established the relatively low figure of 859 victims of political violence during the first Austrian Republic (12 Nov. 1918 – 11 Feb. 1934), but this figure does not account for the murders committed by the numerous Austrian volunteers who fought in German Freikorps. Gerhard Botz, Gewalt in der Politik: Attentate, Zusammenstöße, Putschversuche, Unruhen in Österreich, 1918 bis 1938, 2nd edn (Munich, 1983), 237.

3 Fröhlich, Wider den weißen Mord, 16.

the hope of bringing about the downfall of the republican regimes and communist movements of Central Europe.⁵ These contacts culminated in a clandestine series of meetings between high-ranking paramilitary leaders in Budapest and Bavaria in the summer of 1920, where concrete plans were made for the co-ordinated suppression of revolutionary unrest and the replacement of democratic regimes in Germany and Austria.⁶ As Erich Ludendorff noted in a private letter to the Hungarian Regent, Miklós Horthy, on 19 August 1920, the aim of these meetings was to intensify existing links between the former wartime allies and to establish a common front of counter-revolutionaries in Central Europe:

> Your Highness is surely aware of the warm sympathy I have for Hungary, and of my expectations from co-operation between Hungary and Germany [which for Ludendorff included German Austria]. For here rests our rescue from the red peril of the East... Unity of action, which is required in all circumstances, can be achieved only when the fatal peace treaties are put out of operation. Here, too, exists a community of interests for Hungary and Germany. In view of this internal and external situation, I believe co-operation can never be too close.⁷

Despite the intensity of contacts between German, Austrian and Hungarian counter-revolutionaries, scholarly accounts of the ‘White Terror’ have avoided the question to what extent the common wartime experience, and, perhaps more importantly, the equally common shock of defeat and revolution, contributed to the creation of a transnational zone of paramilitary violence in Central Europe that outlasted the end of the Great War by several

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⁶ Accounts of the Budapest meetings can be found in Pál Prónay, A határban a halál kasszál: fejezetek Prónay Pál feljegyzéseiből [Death Reaps in the Field: Chapters from the Notes of Pál Prónay], ed. Ágnes Szabó and Ervin Pamlényi (Budapest, 1963), as well as in J. T. Trebitsch-Lincoln, Der grösste Abenteurer des XX. Jahrhunderts! (Vienna, 1931), 201–2, and in the notes of Max Bauer’s secretary, Louise Engeler, in Max Bauer Papers, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL 22/69, 23–40. See also Bernard Wasserstein, The Secret Lives of Trebitsch Lincoln (New Haven and London, 1988), 163–74.

⁷ Ludendorff to Horthy, in Miklós Szinai and László Szűcs (eds.), The Confidential Papers of Admiral Horthy (Budapest, 1965), 26–8.
years. Although it is widely accepted that there existed important structural similarities between the revolutionary movements of Central Europe, the same cannot be said about those right-wing militants who opposed them. At least in part, this neglect owes much to the long-standing dominance of national paradigms in historical research on political violence, paradigms which have recently come under attack for excluding examination of forms of violent behaviour that replicate themselves across international borders, particularly in areas such as Central Europe after 1918 where national frontiers were disputed, embattled or altogether ignored. Previous research in this field has portrayed the various paramilitary groups of post-war Europe as 'national' phenomena, thereby underscoring the traditional emphasis on national peculiarities and tending to neglect the ways in which German, Austrian and Hungarian activists operated in a transnational theatre of violence in which they moved effortlessly across national borders. As is suggested in this essay, counter-revolutionary violence after 1918 had a seemingly paradoxical impact on Central Europe. On the one hand, it obviously constituted a destructive force that intensified the fragmentation of post-war Central Europe. On the other hand, post-war violence was also a constructive, transnationalizing force that created new supranational milieux of perpetrators and victims.

A second characteristic of previous accounts of the White Terror in Central Europe has been the way in which they have

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focused almost exclusively on the political history of paramilitary violence. With the notable exception of Klaus Theweleit’s *Male Fantasies*, a voluminous psychoanalytical attempt to explain the mindsets of German Freikorps men, historiography on the post-war militias has largely ignored the mentalities of the activists, as well as the group dynamics that helped to transform their profound discontent with revolution and defeat into a killing rage.\(^{11}\)

Against this background, the article offers a new perspective on paramilitary violence that differs from previous investigations in two ways. First, it conceptualizes post-war Central Europe as a transnational theatre of paramilitary ultra-violence in which a new type of warrior, born out of Central Europe’s ‘culture of defeat’ and unrestrained by conventional military discipline and moral reservations, staged bloody rituals of retribution against real and imagined enemies.\(^{12}\) Secondly, this essay engages closely with the cultural, social and psychological preconditions and group dynamics that shaped the activists’ response to defeat and revolution.\(^{13}\) Apart from investigating the social origins and composition of ultra-violent paramilitary movements in Central Europe, it therefore places particular emphasis on the human agency of individuals. In order to contribute to a better understanding of a transnational masculine subculture of militant radicals that staged a privatized mercenary warfare unseen in Central

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Europe since the days of the Thirty Years War, it addresses the activists' perceptions of the post-war situation and the constructed 'rationality' that made killing an entirely plausible form of political communication. In sum, this article should be seen as a contribution both to the current debate about transnational approaches to the history of Central Europe, and to the growing interest in cultural and social-psychological approaches to political violence.

The investigation focuses on those demobilized officers, officer cadets and nationalist students who formed the backbone of paramilitary units between the Great War and the early to mid 1920s when Germany and Austria entered a temporary period of relative stabilization and the government of István Bethlen put an end to the White Terror in Hungary. These activists formed a fairly homogeneous transnational milieu of predominantly middle- and upper-class political radicals characterized by youth and war-induced militancy. The vast majority of the several hundred thousand paramilitary activists in post-war Central Europe were between 20 and 30 years old, some under 18, and very few over 40. Born between the late 1880s and the early 1900s, the activists reached maturity in the turbulent years before or during the war. The leading figures involved in counter-revolutionary atrocities were junior officers (lieutenants and captains in particular) such as Pál Prónay, Miklós Kozma, István Héijas, Waldemar Papst, Hanns Albin Rauter, Gerhard Roßbach and Franz von Stephani, who had been socialized in the military cultures of the late Central European empires. Senior officers such as Erich Ludendorff, Rüdiger von der Goltz and

14 Similar approaches have been suggested in innovative studies on Nazi perpetrators and on terrorist movements in 1970s Germany and Italy. See Harald Welzer, Täter: wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder wurden (Frankfurt am Main, 2005), 43, and Donatella della Porta, Social Movements, Political Violence, and the State: A Comparative Analysis of Italy and Germany (Cambridge, 1995).

15 For Germany, see Günter Paulus, 'Die soziale Struktur der Freikorps in den ersten Monaten nach der Novemberrevolution', Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft, iii (1955), 696–8. See also Archiv der Forschungsstelle Zeitgeschichte in Hamburg, 4133 ('Freikorps'). For Hungary, see Béla Kelemen, Adatok a szegedi ellenforradalom és a szegedi kormány történetéhez [Data on the History of the Szeged Counter-Revolution and the Szeged Government] (Szeged, 1923), 495–6. For Austria, see Botz, Gewalt in der Politik, 239–40.

Miklós Horthy were the exception and they generally assumed the role of fatherly patrons rather than being personally involved in any atrocities. In addition to the former front-line soldiers, a substantial part of the activists — in Germany and Austria perhaps as much as a half — were too young to have been brutalized by the Great War. For many of these young officer cadets and nationalist students, who had grown up on tales of heroic bloodshed but had missed out on their first-hand experience of the ‘storms of steel’, the militias appear to have offered a welcome opportunity to live their violent fantasies of a romanticized warrior existence and to follow the example of the youthful student volunteers who had fought and often died on the ‘field of honour’. Together they formed explosive subcultures of ultra-militant masculinity in which brutal violence was an acceptable, indeed even desirable, form of political expression. Their violence was channelled by German, Austrian and Hungarian variants of the stab-in-the-back myth, which identified those responsible for weakening the home front, causing military defeat and the revolutions of Central Europe, namely Jews, left-wing intellectuals and politicians, as well as so-called ‘politicized women’.

An account of post-war paramilitary activity in Europe could include other related instances of right-wing violence, for example in Italy, Finland, Russia and the Ukraine during their respective civil wars. The Russian Revolution and the subsequent civil
war in particular featured prominently in the minds of paramilitary activists in Central Europe (if only as a scenario they desperately wanted to prevent repeating itself in their region) and many of the atrocities attributed to the Central European revolutionary left were a direct reflection of the horror stories about the ‘Red Terror’ that emanated from the East. However, apart from the issue of practicality, there is good reason to suggest that this article’s focus on Austria, Hungary and Germany is an accurate reflection of the activists’ mental maps. They were shaped by the common experiences of war, military defeat, unfulfilled imperialist ambitions, revolution, territorial amputation and irredentism. They also shared a militant opposition to Western democracy and, more importantly, to the Slavonic world, which was perceived as the origin of nearly everything the Central European counter-revolutionaries despised: a world of disorder, disease and ‘Slavonic-Jewish Bolshevism’. Russia in particular, as one activist phrased it, was seen as a ‘godforsaken wasteland of slime’, an alien planet ‘without a glimmer of Central European Kultur’, which only mattered in the sense that it reminded the Central European activists of the acute threat of Bolshevist-inspired revolution in their own countries.

For those paramilitary activists who had participated in the Great War, the alliance between Germany, Austria and Hungary lived on in their crusade against Bolshevism. If, as Ute Frevert has suggested, the Great War generally constituted a powerful transnational experience, a period of multinational contacts and

(n. 20 cont.)


21 Gerd Koenen, Der Russland-Komplex: die Deutschen und der Osten, 1900–1945 (Munich, 2005), 218–24.

transfers, these exchanges were particularly intense between soldiers who fought on the same side.\textsuperscript{23} The war provided an important space for personal encounters and exchanges between the future protagonists in the Central European counter-revolution and created networks that survived the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and German empires. Despite continuing Austro-Hungarian tensions after 1918, Vienna remained the principal centre for Hungary's sizeable refugee community, both before and after Horthy's accession to power. During the brief period of the Béla Kun regime in 1919, almost 100,000 Hungarians fled to Austria (while 1,200 Austrian Volkswehr soldiers fought in the Hungarian 'Red Army'), among them roughly 10,000–15,000 officers.\textsuperscript{24} Not all of these refugees were, of course, willing or able to resort to violence against the Kun regime, but the Austrian capital hosted many prominent counter-revolutionary refugees, radicals such as Gyula Gömbös as well as moderates such as Anton Lehár and István Bethlen, whose influential Anti-Bolshevik Committee, founded in April 1919, was based in the palace of an Austrian aristocrat, Karl von Schönborn-Buchheim.\textsuperscript{25} After the collapse of the short-lived Béla Kun regime, Hungary in turn provided a safe haven for ultra-nationalist radicals such as Franz von Stephani, responsible for the killing of eight workers' emissaries during the Spartacist Uprising, and the assassin of Matthias Erzberger, Heinrich Tillessen, who found refuge on the country estate of the subsequent Hungarian prime minister, Gyula Gömbös.\textsuperscript{26} While the German republican police unsuccessfully tried to extradite these terrorists, the national borders between Germany, Austria and Hungary proved to be no significant obstacle to counter-revolutionary activists, who received active support from the Bavarian border

\textsuperscript{25} Mócsy, Effects of World War I, 106.
\textsuperscript{26} On Stephani, see Bauer Papers, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL 22/69, 24. On Tillessen, see 'Akte des Oberstaatsanwalts bei den Landgerichten Mannheim und Heidelberg/Strasische Tillessen': Staatsarchiv Freiburg, F179/13–14; 'Vertraulicher Bericht der Deutschen Gesellschaft Budapest vom 17.4.1923': Staatsarchiv Freiburg, StA Offenburg, 1984/553/87.
guards. Tibor Eckhardt, for example, fondly recalled his visits to Munich ‘to maintain good relations with our anti-Communist friends there’.27 The German co-organizer of the failed Kapp putsch and leader of the radical nationalist terror organization Consul, Hermann Ehrhardt, and the assassin of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, Waldemar Papst, spent more time in Austria during the 1920s than in Germany. Papst, in fact, remained the principal military organizer of the Heimwehr movement until he was expelled from Austria in the early 1930s on the well-founded charge of conspiring against the Republic.28 Nor was the transfer of counter-revolutionary personnel a one-way street from Germany to Austria. The subsequent Heimwehr leader, Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg, participated in the crushing of the Munich Soviet republic as well as in the ‘Battle of Annaberg’ (1921) in Upper Silesia, where he and his future deputy and compatriot, Hanns Albin Rauter, volunteered to fight Polish insurgents.29

An investigation of the White Terror in Central Europe can build upon an extremely rich body of primary sources. Most important for a study that aims to explain the paramilitaries’ actions and perceptions of the ‘hostile’ world are the numerous memoirs, diaries and letters written by former activists, in which the experiences of the immediate post-war period are narrated from a personal perspective.30 For this article, samples were taken from the autobiographical accounts and unpublished private papers of more than thirty Austrian, German and Hungarian activists. Handled with care, and measured against other evidence such as police files, court testimonies and victims’ accounts, these personal documents provide illuminating insights into the mentalities and moral universe of the activists and shed new light on the Central European zone of post-war paramilitary violence.

29 Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg, Memoiren (Vienna, 1971), and Rauter Papers, Nederlands Instituut voor Oorlogsdocumentatie, Amsterdam (hereafter NIOD), Doc I, 1380, H, 3–4.
In 1929, the Freikorps veteran Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz embarked on an ambitious project. He wanted to portray a generation of young men who had fought in the Great War, experienced the frustrations of defeat and revolution, and joined the forces of counter-revolution. ‘When we were 17’, Heinz wrote in the introduction to his book *Sprengstoff*,

the calling of our blood drove us into the trenches . . . When they told us that the war was over, we laughed, because we ourselves were the war. Its flame continued to burn in us, it lived on in our deeds surrounded by a glowing and frightful aura of destruction. We followed our inner calling and marched on the battlefields of the post-war period just as we had marched towards the front: we were singing, full of recklessness and adventurism whilst marching; we were grim, silent and merciless in combat.\textsuperscript{31}

Although Heinz provided a predictably romanticized account of his Freikorps experience, his emphasis on the smooth transition from wartime military conflict to post-war paramilitary violence was not exaggerated. In the east, in Latvia, Upper Silesia, Carinthia and the Burgenland, military conflict continued unabated, often taking an even more brutal form than during the Great War because the activists were no longer ‘restrained’ by military discipline.\textsuperscript{32} Furthermore, the lost war left an explosive legacy of unfulfilled ambitions, deep resentment and militant activism that was now directed against *internal* as well as external enemies.\textsuperscript{33}

While the vast majority of the more than sixteen million German, Austrian and Hungarian soldiers who had fought in (and survived) the Great War returned to civilian lives in November 1918, it is also true that the leaders of almost every paramilitary formation in Germany, Austria and Hungary were ex-officers, mostly lieutenants and captains. In Hungary, it was not


only Gyula Gömbös’s powerful ex-officers’ organization MOVE (Magyar Országos Véderő Egyet; Hungarian National Defence Union) or the Union of Awakening Hungarians (Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete) that was dominated by former combat officers, but also the much more sizeable Hungarian National Army. Of the 6,568 volunteers who followed Horthy’s initial recruitment call of 5 June 1919 for the formation of the counter-revolutionary National Army, almost 3,000 were former infantry and cavalry officers and an additional 800 men were officers from the semi-military border guards, the Gendarmerie. The situation in Germany reveals a similar picture: of the 225,000 German officers who returned in 1918, about a quarter (as much as a half in Bavaria) ended up in one of the various Freikorps formations. In Austria, the early Heimatschutz movement (particularly in Styria and Carinthia) and the militant anti-communist organizations such as Colonel Hermann Hiltl’s Front Fighters’ Association of German Austria (Frontkämpfervereinigung Deutsch-Österreichs) and Captain Karl Burian’s Ostara were dominated by ex-officers. And even though at its high point in the late 1920s 70 per cent of the Heimwehr’s active members and sympathizers were peasants, the organization was run by former combat officers such as Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg, Hanns Albin Rauter, Eduard Baar von Baarenfels and Waldemar Papst. The considerable surplus of ex-officers in many paramilitary formations often made it necessary to set up special units composed almost exclusively of junior officers. For these men who had actively participated in the Great War, the experience of the trenches remained a ‘great revelation’, the focal point of their adolescent lives. They refused to accept that military defeat had caused the collapse of the Central European empires and regarded the revolutions in Berlin, Vienna and Budapest as an intolerable insult to their honour as ‘militarily undefeated’ officers. As the war veteran and infamous Freikorps leader Manfred von Killinger expressed it in a letter to his family, ‘I have made a promise to myself, Father.

34 Kelemen, Adatok, 495–6.
37 Rauter Papers, NIOD, Doc I, 1380, H, 2.
Without armed struggle, I handed over my torpedo boat to the enemies and watched my flag go down. I have sworn to take revenge against those who are responsible for this'.

To be sure, the common opposition to revolution and defeat did not indicate that all activists shared the same ideological aims and ambitions. It is certainly true that the counter-revolutionary activists in all three states were deeply divided by their divergent visions of the future form of state: there were strong legitimist forces (particularly in the Hungarian community in Vienna, from where two attempts were undertaken to restore the last Habsburg emperor, Charles I, to the throne of St Stephen), proto-fascist activists who despised the monarchy nearly as much as they despised communism, as well as neo-conservative nationalists with little sympathy for either monarchism or fascism. Yet, as long as the perceived threat of international Bolshevism and fear of national decay and territorial disintegration persisted, there was a clear common goal that temporarily seemed more important than any disagreements about the future form of state: the suppression of Bolshevik unrest and, as Waldemar Papst, a key figure in both the German and Austrian counter-revolutions, phrased it in his secret manifesto for a ‘White International’, ‘the replacement of the old trinity of the French Revolution [liberté, égalité, fraternité] . . . with a new trinity: authority, order, justice’.

In explaining their determination to continue their soldierly existence after November 1918, leading ex-officers in the Freikorps, the Heimwehr and the Hungarian militias frequently invoked the horrors of returning from the front in 1918 to an entirely hostile world of communist upheaval, and the collapse of military hierarchies and political order. As Miklós Horthy, certainly not the most militant of the Hungarian counter-revolutionaries, recalled in his memoirs: ‘It was impossible to come to terms with the changed situation. Budapest . . . was simply unrecognizable . . . vandalizing groups paraded through the streets, led by soldiers in sloppy uniforms who were carrying red flags’. Even in 1919,
after the fall of Béla Kun, he called Budapest ‘a guilty and sinful city’, a ‘Babylon’ which ‘denied her thousand-year-old history, threw the national crown and national colours into the dust and dressed herself in red rags’.  

Hanns Albin Rauter, who returned to Graz after serving in a Hungarian division for the final weeks of the war, recalled an even more direct contact with the ‘red mob’: ‘When I finally arrived in Graz, I found that the communists had taken the streets’. Confronted by a group of communist junior soldiers, ‘I pulled my gun and I was arrested. This was how the Heimat welcomed me’. Being arrested by soldiers of lower rank reinforced Rauter’s perception of having returned to a ‘world turned upside down’, a revolutionary world in which hitherto unquestioned norms and values, social hierarchies, institutions and authorities had suddenly become obsolete.

Many future activists further remembered being stripped of their military decorations by agitated crowds or lower-ranked soldiers as particularly humiliating experiences. The subsequent Austrian Heimwehr leader Ernst Rüdiger Starhemberg — a descendant of the Count Starhemberg who had halted the Turkish advance on Vienna in 1683 — described his first encounter with revolutionary crowds in Linz in 1918 as an experience that demanded retribution:

On a grey November morning, I was allowed to leave [the barracks] for the first time... When I came closer to the main streets of the city, I heard wild shouting. Soon I saw a larger crowd of people, among them several soldiers in combat uniform... Some were wearing red armbands. Roughly twelve or fifteen of them were beating up two young officers... A few civilians shouted and women were screaming ‘beat them to death, the damned officers!’... I quickly approached the scene... [but] I didn’t get very far... I was already surrounded by a group of soldiers and felt the first blows... They took my stars and my medals for bravery as well, and the ‘Große Silberne’ [a high military decoration] with the


Kaiser's face was thrust into the dirty street. Suddenly they left us alone... I spat out the blood and collected the pieces of my sabre and my decorations for bravery in the field. 'Damned rabble', I thought, 'there will be a day of reckoning for you'.

As a member of the Austrian aristocracy, Starhemberg — and many other representatives of his class in Central Europe — felt particularly alarmed by the revolutions of 1918–19, which threatened their social privileges or (in Hungary) introduced laws that would deprive them of much of their material wealth. Moreover, they felt that their very existence was threatened by the revolution. Thus, unsurprisingly, aristocrats were highly overrepresented in the counter-revolutionary movements of Central Europe. In Germany, where the aristocracy constituted less than 0.5 per cent of the overall population, 42 of the 132 officially listed Freikorps were led by aristocratic ex-officers. The social composition of one of the most infamous Hungarian units, the Prônay detachment, reveals an even more dramatic picture: out of its initial 163 members in 1919, 86 belonged to the nobility, 51 to the upper middle class and only 26 were from the lower middle classes or peasantry.

However, it would be wrong to suggest that the counter-revolutionary movements of Central Europe were composed exclusively of aristocrats agitated by the loss of their social standing and by ex-officers brutalized by the Great War. The Baltic campaign of 1919 in particular attracted a large number of unemployed ex-soldiers and landless labourers who were lured into military action by the promise of land for settlement in the east, and who used the temporary absence of a state monopoly of violence for theft, plunder and extortion.

The experience of defeat and revolution also contributed to the mobilization and radicalization of those future paramilitary activists who had been too young to serve in the war and who were to...
gain their first combat experiences on the post-war battlefields of Latvia, Upper Silesia, the Burgenland and Carinthia. Whilst walking through the streets of Berlin in his officer cadet uniform in November 1918, the 16-year-old Ernst von Salomon, for example, had an encounter he would subsequently describe as his 'political awakening':

I felt myself turning pale, I pulled myself together and said to myself 'stand to attention'... I sensed chaos and turmoil. A huge flag was carried in front of a long procession of people, and the flag was red... I stood still and watched. Following the flag, tired crowds surged in a disorderly fashion. Women marched in front. They proceeded in their wide skirts, the grey skin of their sharp bony faces was wrinkled... Covered in dark, ragged cloths they were singing a song which was out of tune with the hesitant heaviness of their march... Here they were: the champions of the revolution. So this was the dark crowd from which the glowing flame [of revolution] was to emerge, the crowd set out to realize the dream of blood and barricades. It was impossible to capitulate to them. I sneered at their claims which knew no pride, no confidence in victory... I stood straight and watched and thought 'cowards' and 'scum' and 'mob' and I... watched these hollow, dissolute figures; they are just like rats, I thought, grey and with red-framed eyes, carrying the dust of the streets on their backs.48

What Salomon, the son of a senior Prussian officer, described was a nightmare that had haunted Europe's conservative establishment since the French Revolution, a nightmare that had apparently become reality: the triumph of an effeminate revolutionary crowd of 'hysterical' men and women over law and justice, a crowd composed of human 'rats' spreading the 'diseases' of Bolshevism and disorder.49 The image which Salomon invoked was partly influenced by a vulgarized understanding of Gustave Le Bon's *Psychologie des foules* (1895), whose ideas were widely discussed in right-wing circles from the turn of the century.50

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Le Bon’s juxtaposition of the ‘barbarian’ masses and the ‘civilized’ individual was also reflected in the way in which Salomon and many others in Germany, Austria and Hungary described the return of the front-line soldiers. The soldier, who had fought an ‘honourable’ war, returned home in an orderly fashion and could only feel disgust for the revolutionary crowd that had betrayed his sacrifice: ‘And when I saw these deadly determined faces’, Salomon recalled, ‘these eyes which looked away from the crowd, alien, disconnected, hostile . . . then I knew . . . these men did not belong to those who had gathered in the streets, did not want to belong to them’.

Born in 1902, Salomon was part of the so-called ‘war youth generation’ that had been nourished on heroic tales of bloodshed and propaganda which suggested right up until November 1918 that military victory was in sight. Although they had no first-hand experience of the trenches, younger paramilitaries of Salomon’s generation often surpassed the war veterans in terms of activism, radicalism and brutality — a pattern evident in other zones of armed conflict. The founder of the Austrian monarchist combat organization, the League of the Unafraid (Bund der Unerschrockenen), Erwin Neustein, was a 15-year-old high-school student. Students also dominated in the Austrian volunteer formations that helped to crush the Munich Räterepublik and the Third Polish Uprising of 1921. In Germany, one of the most widely discussed cases of paramilitary atrocity involved a number of fraternity students from Marburg who had shot more than a dozen previously imprisoned ‘Spartacists’ in Thuringia. On another occasion, during the communist uprising in the Ruhr in 1920, a young student volunteer joyfully reported in a letter to his parents: ‘No pardon is given. We shoot even the wounded. The enthusiasm is tremendous — unbelievable. Our battalion has had

51 Salomon, Die Geachteten, 30–1.
52 See, for example, Ernst von Salomon, Die Kadetten (Berlin, 1933), 313–15.
two deaths, the Reds two or three hundred. Anyone who falls into our hands gets the rifle butt and is then finished off with a bullet. And even the Hungarian militia leader, Pál Prónay, infamous for ruthlessly torturing and burning his victims alive, was positively surprised by the ‘overly ambitious and highly motivated new recruits’ who tried to impress him by ‘beating up Jews outside the gate of the barracks or by bringing them in where they can give them a real thrashing’.

Recent anthropological and social-psychological studies of violence have repeatedly warned against explaining such forms of behaviour as the result of psychological defects or ‘abnormal’ sadism. What is more likely to have driven these younger paramilitaries, who under different circumstances probably would have lived ‘normal’ peaceful existences, was both a violent rejection of an unexpected defeat and of revolutionary unrest, and a strong desire to prove themselves in battle. The officer cadets, in particular, who had been mentally and physically prepared for a heroic death on the battlefield, felt a deep sense of betrayal when the war ended abruptly in 1918. Once they had joined paramilitary units dominated by former shock-troop officers, they were keen to prove their worthiness within a community of often highly decorated warriors and ‘war heroes’, a community that offered them the opportunity to act upon their adolescent power fantasies and to live up to the idealized image of ultra-militarized masculinity promoted in wartime propaganda and books such as Walter Flex’s Wanderer zwischen den Welten and Ernst Jünger’s war epic In Stahlgewittern.

In marked contrast to the upheaval that surrounded them, the militias offered clearly defined hierarchies and a familiar sense of

56 Max Zeller, as quoted in Jones, Hitler’s Heralds, 50.
57 Prónay, A hatában a halál kasszál, ed. Szabó and Pamlényi, 41.
belonging and purpose. The militia groups were fortresses of soldierly camaraderie and order in what the activists perceived as a hostile world of communist chaos.\(^{60}\) Within these paramilitary subcultures, violence against the enemy served as a creative rather than a destructive force: it created new hierarchies, group dynamics and a moral universe in which killing was the norm, whereas non-violence was considered a deviant and cowardly form of behaviour.\(^{61}\) Acts of violence also served as rituals of male bonding and increased the moral distance between the activists and the despised civilian society.

The paramilitaries' inclination to use ultra-violence against their enemies was further exacerbated by news (some true, some exaggerated or imagined) about communist atrocities in revolutionary Berlin, Munich, Budapest and Vienna. Although historical research has demonstrated quite clearly that the number of casualties inflicted during the 'Red Terror' of 1919 was remarkably low (five in Austria, 100–200 in Germany, 400–500 in Hungary), accounts of mass murder, rape, mutilations of corpses and castrations of prisoners by revolutionary 'savages' featured very prominently in paramilitaries' autobiographies, where they served the purpose of legitimizing ultra-violence against a dehumanized enemy accused of pursuing a policy of total annihilation.

Even in Austria, where only five representatives of the state executive were killed by communist insurgents in the course of the revolution, there existed an acute fear of being 'slaughtered' by the 'Reds'.\(^{62}\) As the high-school teacher Karl Hellering, a prominent figure in Vienna's paramilitary scene, wrote in the journal Grobian: 'Rather than wait until some Jewish-paid menial [gedungener judenknecht] crushes my skull with a club or slams a knife between my ribs, I prefer to shoot so long as I have bullets'.\(^{63}\)

In Hungary, where the Red Terror of 1919 claimed the lives of between 400 and 500 victims, violent fantasies of retribution were

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\(^{60}\) On the subject of camaraderie in a military context, see Thomas Kühne, *Kameradschaft: die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 2006).

\(^{61}\) On the importance of such group dynamics for the creation of violent subcultures, see B. P. Meier and V. B. Heinz, 'A Comparison of Human Aggression Committed by Groups and Individuals: An Interindividual–Intergroup Discontinuity', *Jl Experimental Social Psychol.*, xl (2004).


\(^{63}\) Hellering, as quoted in Botz, *Gewalt in der Politik*, 91.
even more widespread. The atrocities committed by the so-called ‘Lenin Boys’ under the leadership of József Csérsny in particular spurred the imagination of counter-revolutionary activists. The Hungarian officer Miklós Kozma, who had spent the war as a hussar under the command of the German General von Mackensen, wrote in early August 1919:

We shall see to it . . . that the flame of nationalism leaps high . . . We shall punish. Those who for months have committed heinous crimes must receive their punishment. It is predictable . . . that the compromisers and those with weak stomachs will moan and groan when we line up some red rogues and terrorists against the wall. The false slogans of humanism and other ‘isms’ have helped to drive the country into ruin before. This second time they will wail in vain.64

Wherever a temporary power vacuum allowed the militia men to act upon these fantasies of violent retribution, they did. After the failure of communist attempts to take over power in Berlin and Vienna, during the communist uprising in the Ruhr, and after the collapse of the revolutions in Hungary and Munich, came what Starhemberg called the ‘day of reckoning’. If they did not manage to escape in time, revolutionary leaders were arrested, beaten, and strung up or shot on the spot. Karl Liebknecht, Rosa Luxemburg, Kurt Eisner and Tibor Szamuely were among those who did not survive the initial wave of counter-revolutionary retribution in 1919. Prominent intellectual critics of the White Terror such as Béla Somogyi, the Hungarian journalist and editor of the Socialist Democratic daily Népszava, and the Austrian novelist Hugo Bettauer were murdered over the course of the 1920s or, in the case of the German editor of Die Zukunft, Maximilian Harden, so seriously injured that the victim died a few years later as a consequence of the wounds inflicted.65 Given that many leading Hungarian revolutionaries (including Béla Kun) managed to escape before they could be arrested, others had to pay for their ‘treason’. Socialist workers, when caught, were dragged into the barracks and beaten unconscious. ‘On these occasions’, Prónay recalled, ‘I ordered an additional fifty strokes with the rod for these fanatic human animals, whose heads were drunk with


the twisted ideology of Marx'.

In Germany, the prominent writer Ernst Schauwecker fondly remembered the torturing of communist emissaries by members of the Freikorps Epp: ‘The emissaries of the various councils were given a sound thrashing, and the Red railway patrols never returned to the stretch between Lichtenfels and Saalfeld’. For Prónay, the volunteers of the Freikorps Epp and many others, the dehumanized (‘human animal’) and denationalized (Bolshevik) enemy could be tortured and killed without remorse, because these acts were legitimized and necessitated by the holiness of the cause: the salvation of the nation threatened by a socialist abyss. Against the background of war and revolution, the activists were convinced that they lived in an age of unfettered violence, in which the internal enemy, who had broken the rules of ‘civilized’ military conduct, could only be stopped through the use of ultra-violence.

This reasoning was taken to its extreme in the Hungarian Plain and, even more dramatically, in the Baltic Freikorps campaign, where previously disciplined troops transformed into marauding mercenaries reminiscent of those of the Thirty Years War, modern warlords who plundered and murdered their way across the countryside, transforming it into a landscape of destruction.

In 1946/7, while waiting for his execution, the former Lagerkommandant of Auschwitz, Rudolf Höß, still recalled the Baltic campaign as a manifestation of previously unseen violence:

The fighting in the Baltic States was of a wildness and grimness which I experienced neither during the Great War nor in any of the subsequent struggles of the Freikorps. There was no proper front, the enemy was everywhere. Whenever there was a clash, it turned into pure slaughter to the point of complete annihilation . . . Countless times I saw the horrifying images of burned-out huts and charred or rotten bodies of women and children . . . Back then I believed that there could be no intensification of destructive madness!

In addition to physical attacks against their enemies, the paramilitaries exercised symbolic acts of violence, for example by
‘occupying’ certain town squares of ‘liberated’ villages. The pompous entry of the Hungarian National Army into Budapest in 1919 (led by Horthy on a white horse), the erection of armed road blocks in Berlin by German Freikorps during the Kapp putsch, and the large-scale Heimwehr marches in 1920s ‘Red Vienna’ essentially served the same purpose: they were public demonstrations of strength, both literal and symbolic ‘liberations’ of political arenas previously contaminated by the unruly red crowds.

However, violence — either physical or symbolic — was seen not merely as a politically necessary act of self-defence in order to suppress the communist revolts of Central Europe, but also as a positive value in itself, as a morally justified expression of youthful virility that distinguished the activists from the ‘indifferent’ majority of bourgeois society unwilling or scared to rise in the face of revolution and defeat. What Theweleit called the ‘passionate celebration of destruction’ was indeed an important characteristic of paramilitary culture:70 ‘We restlessly hastened to attack’, Heinz recalled, ‘our fists lashed down in destructive lust . . . Yes, our accomplishment was destruction’.71 In a similarly remarkable passage of Salomon’s Die Geächteten, the author describes the ‘joyful’ rituals of violence against property, individuals and undifferentiated crowds that dominated his experience in the Baltic campaign of 1919:

We ran over fields of snow and stormed into the forests. We fired into surprised crowds and we raged, we shot and hunted. We chased the Latvians like rabbits over the fields, we burnt every house and destroyed every bridge and every telegraph mast. We flung the bodies into fountains and threw hand grenades on top. We slaughtered whoever fell into our hands; we burned whatever would catch fire . . . There were no human feelings left in our hearts . . . A giant smoke trail marked our path. We had set fire to the stake where we burnt . . . the bourgeois tablets, the laws and values of the civilized world.72

Although Salomon’s book was written in the late 1920s in a conscious attempt to shock bourgeois society with a possibly exaggerated account of his Freikorps experience, there can be no doubt that he and many other paramilitary activists were committed to

70 See Theweleit’s ‘Nachbemerkung’ to vol. ii of the first German edition of Männerphantasien (Frankfurt am Main, 1978), 534. This section is not included in the English translation (see n. 11 above).
71 Heinz, Sprengstoff, 8–9.
72 Salomon, Die Geächteten, 144–5.
and obsessed by violence, which sometimes even haunted them in their sleep. Lieutenant Fred Henrich, for example, recalled being woken repeatedly by a terrible dream: ‘Whilst holding on to a tree, I stood at the verge of a deep abyss, in which a watermill rotated relentlessly. The mill’s blades were made of long sharp knives’.73 Others, such as Hanns Albin Rauter, aspired to a soldierly death, a fantasy that accompanied him until his final moments in front of a Dutch firing squad after the Second World War, when his last wish was to give the command for his own execution.74

The glamorization of violence as a way of life was, of course, not confined to post-war Central Europe. Already in 1909, the Italian Futurist Filippo Marinetti famously wrote in his manifesto:

We want to exalt movements of aggression... the blow with the fist... We want to glorify war — the only cure for the world — and militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas which kill, and contempt for women. We want to demolish museums and libraries, fight morality, feminism and all opportunist and utilitarian cowardice.75

However, it was the concrete experience of mass killing and industrialized warfare, defeat, and revolution, as well as the relative power vacuum established by the collapse of the Central European empires, that transformed Marinetti’s primarily rhetorical adoration of the ‘beautiful ideas which kill’ into ugly practice. To be sure, ultra-violence — largely absent in Europe between the end of the Thirty Years War and 1914 — had been practised by Europe’s colonial powers against indigenous populations for many decades before the outbreak of the Great War, and the scholarly debate about the impact of colonial genocides on Europe’s total wars in the twentieth century is far from over.76 Yet, in order to explain why Germany, Austria and Hungary (rather than Britain, France, Belgium and the Netherlands) witnessed the emergence of ultra-violent subcultures after 1918, it

73 Fred Henrich, ‘Fred Henrich erinnert sich’, unpubd MS, 3 vols.: Institut für Zeitgeschichte, Munich, MS 552/1, i, 10.
74 Rauter Papers, NIOD, KB I, 5644.
seems more important to focus on those violent inner-European experiences which they all shared: the Great War, defeat and revolution. The events of 1914–19 created a socially homogeneous Central European subculture of paramilitary activists defined less by ideology than by their determination to suppress violently those held responsible for defeat, revolution and territorial disintegration.

III

Those who suffered most from paramilitary ultra-violence after the Great War were the Jews of Central Europe. While anti-Semitism was certainly common currency among right-wing circles in most European countries at the time, it was converted into physical action in post-war Central Europe. As Jakob Krausz, a Jewish-Hungarian refugee in Vienna, observed in 1922,

anti-Semitism did not lose its intensity during the war. Quite the opposite: it unfolded in a more beastly way. This war has only made the anti-Semites more brutal . . . The trenches were flooded with anti-Semitic pamphlets, particularly those of the Central Powers. The more their situation deteriorated, the more intense and bloodthirsty the anti-Semitic propaganda became. The post-war pogroms in Hungary, Poland and the Ukraine, as well as the anti-Semitic campaigns in Germany and Austria, were prepared in the trenches.77

As Krausz correctly observed, one of the main reasons for the violent anti-Semitism in Central Europe after 1918 was that the Jews became the projection screen for everything the counter-revolutionaries despised. Paradoxically, they could simultaneously be portrayed as the embodiment of a pan-Slavonic revolutionary menace from ‘the East’ that threatened the traditional order of Christian Central Europe, as ‘red agents’ of Moscow, and as representatives of an obscure ‘Golden International’ and Western democratization.

In Hungary, more so than in Germany and Austria, anti-Semitic violence was tolerated by the authorities of the Horthy regime and applauded by the nationalist press.78 A report on

anti-Semitic violence published in Vienna in 1922 reported that ‘more than 3,000 Jews were murdered in Transdanubia’, the broad region of Hungary west of the Danube. A typical case of anti-Semitic violence in Hungary was reported to the police by Ignaz Bing from Böhönye in October 1919:

During the night before 1 October, a group of sixty White Guards came to our community and ordered that every Jewish man had to appear immediately on the market square. The Jewish men, seventeen altogether, who were entirely innocent of communist activity, followed the order. When they had assembled, they were beaten and tortured and — without any interrogation — they [the soldiers] started hanging them . . .

— an act of violence that served the dual purpose of eliminating the ‘source of Bolshevism’ and giving a public demonstration of what would happen to an enemy who fell into their hands. Although no such incidents of open pogroms were recorded in post-war Germany and Austria, where anti-Semitic violence was confined to individual assassinations of Jewish victims (Rathenau, Bettauer, Harden, Eisner), this was an indication less of the activists’ unwillingness to kill Jews than of their inability to do so without running the risk of state persecution.

At least in part, anti-Semitic violence in post-war Central Europe was fanned by the widespread perception that a ‘Jewish conspiracy’ was at the very heart of the revolutions of 1918–19. In December 1918, for example, the nationalist paper Der Bayerische Wald printed a telling article about the perception of the current revolutionary upheaval:

Among the people’s representatives and other leading men in Berlin we find the names of Cohn, Bernstein, Haase, Oppenheimer, Rosenfeld, Herzfeld, Simon, Landsberg etc. Among the radical Independents and

(n. 78 cont.)


80 Halmi, ‘Akten über die Pogrome in Ungarn’, 64.
Spartacists Liebknecht, Levi and Rosa Luxemburg play the leading role. The foreign policy of the member states is conducted in Bavaria by Eisner, in Württemberg by Heymann, in Saxony by Lipinski, in German Austria by Bauer . . . Who are the true victors over Germany? The French, the English, the Americans? No! No one rules so absolutely in the German ‘Free States’ as Jewry.  

Such newspaper articles certainly helped to reinforce long-standing anti-Semitic sentiments. Heinrich Tillessen, the assassin of Matthias Erzberger, described in a letter to his eldest brother how the right-wing press had opened his eyes about the Jewish conspiracy against the German people: ‘I have read that . . . the epicentre is the exclusively Jewish (they only accept Jews as members) Brai-Briss Orde [sic; he is referring to B’nai B’rith] . . . This is where you have to look for the real wire-pullers. Erzberger, Severing, Scheidemann are only executive organs’.  

In Austria, anti-Semitism was even more widespread. Before 1914, anti-Semitism in Austria had been common currency among right-wing politicians who bitterly complained about the high numbers of Jews from Galicia and the Bukovina that had migrated to Vienna. When Galicia became Polish in 1918 and the Bukovina Romanian, the number of Jewish migrants further increased. In 1918, 125,000 Jews lived in Vienna, although German-Austrian nationalists maintained that the number was as high as 450,000. This influx fanned anti-Semitic feelings in Vienna which — since the days of Karl Lueger and Georg von Schöenerer — were never far from the surface and which had been reinforced by the popular wartime stereotype of the Jewish profiteer. In contrast to those in Germany (but like those in Hungary), anti-Semites in Austria usually appealed to Christian principles and linked the notion of Jewish responsibility for the military collapse to older Christian stereotypes of Jewish

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81 Der Bayerische Wald, 3 Dec. 1918.
82 Heinrich to Karl Tillessen, 27 Dec. 1920: Staatsarchiv Freiburg, F 179/4.
The Christian Social Tyrolese Heimwehr leader Richard Steidle, for example, openly exclaimed in May 1919 that ‘only a thorough reckoning with the spirit of Jewry and its helpers can save the German Alpine lands’.

Anti-Semitism after 1918 was further exacerbated by the fact that the intellectual leader of the Red Guards, Leo Rothziegel, and prominent members of the Social Democratic Party, such as Victor Adler and Otto Bauer, were Jewish.

In Hungary, too, the revolution and the Red Terror of the immediate post-war period were, in the eyes of conservative officers, inextricably linked with Jews, most importantly with the revolutionary leader Béla Kun and his chief military adviser Tibor Szamuely. Immediately after the fall of the Béla Kun regime in early August 1919, the lawyer Oscar Szöllősy published a widely circulated newspaper article on ‘The Criminals of the Dictatorship of the Proletariat’, in which he identified Jewish ‘red, blood-stained knights of hate’ as the main perpetrators of the Red Terror and the driving force behind communism. Jews were also held directly responsible for the military defeat of the Central Powers. According to Gyula Gömbös defeat was a direct consequence of the fact that the Jewish proportion of the population was substantially higher in the Central Powers (1:56) than in the Entente countries (1:227).

To proclaim publicly one’s anti-Semitism and to pride oneself on having used merciless violence against Jewish civilians subsequently became a common mark of distinction among the paramilitary activists of Central Europe. In Hungary, where (by contrast with Germany and Austria) the paramilitary atrocities

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86 Tagespost (Graz), 27 May 1919.

87 On the continued importance of such views in the Hungarian army, see Thomas Lorman, ‘The Right-Radical Ideology in the Hungarian Army, 1921–23’, Central Europe, iii (2005), esp. 76.


against Jews were usually carried out with the tacit acquiescence of the authorities, the situation was particularly extreme. Pál Prónay, for example, collected the chopped-off ears of his Jewish victims as lucky charms.\(^90\) In a private dinner conversation with Max Bauer’s secretary, one of Prónay’s officers, György Geszay, proudly remarked that he had an excellent appetite that evening as he had spent the afternoon roasting a Jew alive in a railway locomotive.\(^91\) For Prónay in particular, collaboration with German and Austrian paramilitaries served one overriding purpose: to allow Hungarian, German and Austrian nationalists to ‘combine forces so that we could turn against the Reds and international Freemasonic Jewry with weapons in our hands’.\(^92\)

In Germany and Austria, where the activists were more limited in their ability to use their weapons freely against ‘international Freemasonic Jewry’, the situation was less extreme. However, the language of violence used by Austrian and German paramilitaries certainly foreshadowed the infinitely more dramatic events of the late 1930s and 1940s.\(^93\) Whether Hanns Albin Rauter expressed his aim to ‘get rid of the Jews as soon as possible’ as a student leader in Graz (more than twenty years before he became Higher SS and Police Leader in the German-occupied Netherlands) or whether German Freikorps soldiers were singing ‘Strike down Walther Rathenau, the God-damned Jewish sow’ — the message was unambiguous and certainly not without consequences.\(^94\) To be seen as a radical anti-Semite was important for one’s credibility within the world of paramilitary activists. Ludendorff’s envoy to Budapest, Max Bauer, for example, complained bitterly in a private letter to Hitler in 1923 that ‘doubts have been raised in your circle about my firm stance towards Jewry. I strongly reject such accusations and I can prove that I took up the fight much earlier

\(^90\) Bodo, ‘Paramilitary Violence’, 134.
\(^91\) Bauer Papers, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, NL 22/69, 33.
\(^92\) Prónay, A határban a halál kasszál, ed. Szabó and Pamlényi, 200.
\(^93\) An extensive list of former Freikorps and Heimwehr soldiers in the Nazi Reichssicherheitshauptamt can be found in Wildt, Generation des Unbedingten, 53–60.
\(^94\) Rauter Papers, NIOD, Doc I, 1380, Pr 6-12-97, 46–7. On anti-Semitism in Austrian and German universities, see Michael Gehler, Studenten und Politik: der Kampf um die Vorherrschaft an der Universität Innsbruck, 1918–1938 (Innsbruck, 1990), 93–8, and Heike Ströle-Bühler, Studentischer Antisemitismus in der Weimarer Republik: eine Analyse der Burschenschaftlichen Blätter, 1918 bis 1933 (Frankfurt am Main and New York, 1991).
than most of your friends. There is no disagreement between the two of us on the final aim'.

Another prominent target for paramilitary rituals of retribution in Central Europe were so-called ‘political’ women. The beating and killing of Rosa Luxemburg in January 1919 may be the best-known case of paramilitary violence against a woman, but it was by no means an isolated event. There are accounts of Austrian and Bavarian Freikorps soldiers shooting captured communist women ‘for target practice’ after the crushing of the Munich Räterepublik. Some of the activists involved in the fighting, such as Manfred von Killinger, recalled having whipped a captured proletarian woman ‘until there was no white spot left on her back’. Others involved in the 1920 fighting in the Ruhr proudly reported: ‘We even shot ten Red Cross nurses ... We shot these little ladies with pleasure — how they cried and pleaded with us to save their lives. Nothing doing! The British Labour Party delegation that published a first-hand account of The White Terror in Hungary in 1921 listed several incidents of prisoners being forced to rape each other and of sexually charged torture, often committed by men who liked to see themselves as old-school gentlemen and who, on other occasions, emphasized the ‘duty of protection of the female gender which a soldier must obey’. The Labour Party delegation exemplified this behaviour by documenting the case of Ms Alexander Hamburger, whose brother-in-law had been a People’s Commissar during the Kun regime. She was arrested on the charge of conspiring against the counter-revolution and, at the command of Héjjas and Prónay, was apparently tortured in the Kelenföld barracks on the outskirts of Budapest.

95 Bauer to Hitler, 25 Apr. 1923: Bauer Papers, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, N 1022/30b, 211.
96 For Germany, see in particular Theweleit, Male Fantasies.
97 Emil Julius Gumbel, Vier Jahre politischer Mord (Berlin, 1922).
98 Manfred von Killinger, Ernstes und Heiteres aus dem Putschleben (Berlin, 1927), 52–3.
99 Max Zeller, as quoted in Jones, Hitler’s Heralds, 182.
100 Quotation from Friedrich Freksa (ed.), Kapitän Ehrhardt: Abenteuer und Schicksale (Berlin, 1924), 45; British Joint Labour Delegation to Hungary, White Terror in Hungary.
In many of these cases, violence against women was directly connected to anti-Semitism. ‘Politicized’ women were allegedly either Jewish themselves or they had subscribed to the ‘Jewish’ ideology of Bolshevism. If they were not directly involved in communist activities, they were accused of weakening the soldiers’ morale by tempting them with their ‘sexual immorality’. The spiritual mentor of the Prónay detachment, Father István Zadravecz, for example, bitterly complained in his diary that ‘the suspicious Jewish-liberal elements . . . hunted down the unmarried officers with their enchantments’, thus undermining the strength and determination of the counter-revolutionary troops.¹⁰²

At least in part, paramilitary violence against women reflected the emergence of a new ultra-militarized masculinity, hardened on the industrial battlefields of the Great War and defined by the experience of war and wartime camaraderie.¹⁰³ This cult of virility, forged in the trenches, and absorbed by parts of the war youth generation, contrasted sharply with the allegedly effeminate world of democratization and peace to which the combat soldiers returned in 1918.

Many paramilitary leaders in Central Europe were convinced that the participation of women in radical left-wing politics in 1918–19 offered proof of the dangerous relationship between female political participation and revolutionary politics, a theme that had been widely discussed in right-wing circles long before 1918.¹⁰⁴ Max Bauer, for example, had been working on a

¹⁰⁴ On the rise of women’s rights movements in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Europe, see most recently Sylvia Paletschek and Bianka Pietrow-Ennker (cont. on p. 205)
manuscript for a book entitled ‘Criticism of the Women’s Movement’ between 1900 and 1918, a period during which he collected hundreds of press clippings on the subject. The criticism that emerged in Bauer’s manuscript centred upon two arguments that were common in right-wing circles: first that the development of gender relations since the turn of the century had led to loose sexual morals among younger women, who had abandoned their traditional role as models of virtue. Secondly, he insisted that female emancipation had led to a de-feminization of women’s lives, which were becoming increasingly ‘male’. This was expressed not only in the childlessness of university-educated women, but also in the new role that women played in the world of politics, ‘a job entirely unsuitable for women’.

From Bauer’s perspective, the events after 1918 seemed to confirm his view of feminism as a major threat to political order. ‘Politicized women’ had betrayed the home front and had helped to execute the fatal ‘stab in the back’ to the otherwise victorious Central European armies. Their ‘betrayal’ consequently justified violent retribution. The domestic servant Marie Sandmayr, for example, was found hanging from a tree in the Forstenrieder Park in Munich after reporting an illegal cache of arms to the police. The note pinned to her chest read: ‘You bitch, you betrayed your Fatherland, so you die by the Black Hand’. In Hungary, too, the experience of defeat and the perceived humiliation of the nation were often associated with recollections of ‘politicized’ women being one of the driving forces in the revolutions of Central Europe. Count Károlyi’s appointment of the leading


107 Bauer Papers, Bundesarchiv Koblenz, N 1022/1c, 199.

Hungarian women’s rights activist Rózsika Bédy-Schwimmer as the world’s first female ambassador met with fiercely hostile reactions from the right, which never failed to mention not only that she was a revolutionary women’s rights activist, but also that she was Jewish.\(^{109}\) The Hungarian Oscar Szöllősy further emphasized in his newspaper article on the criminals of the dictatorship of the proletariat that Jewish women in particular ‘were given a plentiful scope of activity by Bolshevism’.\(^{110}\) He then described their ‘scope of activity’ by pointing out incidents of torture and castration during the Red Terror, in which female doctors had allegedly participated.

However, the image of brutalized communist women was not an exclusively male fantasy. In her 1923 memoirs, Cecile Tormay, for example, the founder and president of the powerful arch-conservative National Association of Hungarian Women (Magyar Asszonyok Nemzeti Szövetsége), even provided a photograph of a female medical doctor, Helen Peczkai, who allegedly ‘enjoyed’ participating in various executions during the Red Terror, so that the reader could visualize ‘typical’ Bolshevik women as short-haired, cruel ‘Red Furies’.\(^{111}\)

The perpetrators of violence against women often legitimized their actions by pointing out that their victims had lost all female qualities and that they were the ones who had started the cycle of violence. In his autobiographical book Landsknechte wurden wir, Erich Balla described the occupation of a Latvian village by German Freikorps. While searching a house occupied by two Latvian women, they made a terrible discovery: ‘the corpses of five brutally mutilated German soldiers. Their eyes, noses, tongues and genitals have been cut off. Their faces and uniforms bear the marks of brutal kicks’.\(^{112}\) Against this background, the Freikorps men’s reaction is described as entirely ‘understandable’: after finding their mutilated comrades, ‘two or three men, obsessed by the same thought, rush upstairs. One can hear the muffled sound

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\(^{109}\) On Schwimmer, see Susan Zimmermann, ‘How They Became Feminists: The Road to the Women’s Movement at the Turn of the Century in Central Europe’, *L’Homme*, viii (1997).


\(^{111}\) Tormay, *Outlaw’s Diary*, i. On Tormay as well as on the peculiar development of women’s organizations in post-war Hungary, see Claudia Papp, ‘Die Kraft der weiblichen Seele’: Feminismus in Ungarn, 1918–1941 (Münster, 2004).

of rifle-butt strokes, and the two women lie dead on the floor'.¹¹³ During the ‘Battle of Riga’ (1919), the situation was even more extreme: they ‘were beating, shooting, stabbing them [communist women] to death, wherever they appeared. On 22 May 1919, four hundred rifle women were lying in their blood in the streets of Riga. Callously the nailed boots of the marching German volunteers trampled over them’.¹¹⁴

Paramilitary violence after 1918 was taken to the extreme in the ‘deep, open spaces’ of the Hungarian Plain and the Baltic theatre where activists could rid themselves of the ‘inherited ballast of civilization’.¹¹⁵ Yet, whatever happened in the Baltic States, the Hungarian Plain, the Burgenland or Upper Silesia was only a concrete translation of those violent fantasies that were harboured by many members of the Central European counter-revolution.

IV

It has been argued in this essay that the three major successor states of the Central European empires — Germany, Austria and Hungary — witnessed the emergence of a transnational subculture of paramilitary activists that was shaped by the successive traumatizing experiences of war, defeat and revolution. The activists shared a determination to use ultra-violence in order to suppress the revolutionary threat and to avenge their perceived humiliations at the hands of external and internal enemies. Their ultra-violence, made possible by a temporary breakdown of legal authority, was both destructive and creative as it helped to establish new transnational subcultures of perpetrators and victims within Central Europe.

If the war had provided an important basis for the creation of an ultra-violent subculture of demobilized officers, defeat and revolution significantly contributed to the radicalization and enlargement of this paramilitary milieu. Ex-officers brutalized by the war and infuriated by defeat and revolution joined forces with members of a younger generation, who compensated for their lack of combat experience by often surpassing the war veterans in terms of radicalism, activism and brutality. Together they formed an

¹¹⁵ Franz Nord, ‘Der Krieg im Baltikum’, in Ernst Jünger (ed.), *Der Kampf ums Reich* (Essen, 1929), 64.
ultra-militant masculine subculture that differed from the ‘community of the trenches’ in its social make-up, its ‘liberation’ from the constraints of military discipline, and its self-imposed purpose of destroying both the external and internal enemies.

Despite a high degree of ideological fragmentation within the political right of Central Europe, as well as continuing Austro-Hungarian tensions over the Burgenland question, the counter-revolutionary activists in all three countries agreed on the primary aim of restoring order through violence and identified the same groups as their enemies in what was effectively a transnational civil war. Everywhere in the region, anti-Bolshevism, anti-Semitism and anti-feminism operated as touchstones for paramilitary movements. Their violent retribution was seen not merely as a politically necessary act of self-defence in order to suppress the communist revolts of Central Europe, but also as a positive value in itself that distinguished the activists from the ‘indifferent’ and ‘cowardly’ majority of bourgeois society unwilling to rise up in the face of revolution and defeat.

Ever since the military collapse of the Central European empires in November 1918 and the subsequent revolutions in Berlin, Budapest and Vienna, the counter-revolutionary activists that formed this paramilitary subculture were in direct contact with each other, building on connections established during the war, negotiating ways of co-operation, and exchanging ideas and personnel. As suggested in this essay, the paramilitaries in Germany, Austria and Hungary shared the same fantasies of violence, but differed in their ability to live out these fantasies. Whereas in post-revolutionary Hungary, in Upper Silesia and in the Baltic theatre fantasies turned into reality on a large scale, German and Austrian paramilitaries at home had to ‘confine’ themselves either to the violent suppression of rare communist uprisings (Berlin, Bremen and Munich in 1919, the Ruhr in 1920) or to individual acts of terrorism against representatives of their target groups, which, in many respects, were ciphers for their perceived direct opposites: the ‘internationalist’ (communist or capitalist) Jew threatening the existence of the German or Magyar races, or the ‘politicized’ women as a ‘natural’ enemy of war-induced militant masculinity.

What difference do these findings make to our understanding of the history of paramilitary violence in Central Europe after the Great War? Although the concept of transnationality has come to
dominate the most recent historiography of twentieth-century Central Europe, the vast majority of historians working in the field have focused on the important but rather obvious subjects of, for example, migration, religion or tourism as forms of cross-cultural encounter and interaction. Yet ethnic conflict, war and civil war were, perhaps, the most defining transnational experiences in the region during much of the twentieth century and they, too, contributed to a vast array of contacts and transfers of ideas and personnel across real or imagined borders. The ultra-violence of 1914–20 was instrumental in forging new transnational milieux of perpetrators and victims whose interaction across national borders was an important characteristic of Central European history in the period and would remain so in different guises until the radical reshaping of Central European frontiers and populations in the aftermath of 1945.

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