Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1940

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Introduction: Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1940

Kevin Passmore

Political violence was far from unusual before 1914 and did not die out after 1945. Nevertheless, the immense success in the interwar years of two forces – fascism and communism – that openly espoused the use of violence and illegality for political ends did seem to conflict with the self-image and expectations of liberals and democrats, both at the time and in subsequent historiographical accounts. Not surprisingly, democrats' explanations of this violence depicted it as an anomaly, a temporary blip in the peaceful evolution of the West, Europe and the world (in that order). Integral to this progress narrative was a set of concepts derived from crowd psychology, which is usually associated with Gustave Le Bon, although in fact he had only systematised ideas that were part of the intellectual furniture of the time. For Le Bon, the masses did not assimilate knowledge through reason, but by repetition and rituals, and so they needed simple explanations, images and beliefs to understand the world. In happier times, an elite would guide the 'instincts' of the masses in the right direction. But the shock of economic crisis, war and defeat disoriented the masses, and rendered them vulnerable to manipulation by demagogues – false elites who were themselves close to the crowd. Demagogues shared the masses' propensity towards irrationality and violence, but possessed just enough education to develop half-baked theories, and since they believed these theories fanatically, they were prepared to use violence to enforce them. It is easy to see the snobbery and prejudice in this explanation for violence and the political stakes involved in it: violence was a temporary regression to the past that would ultimately be eradicated by progress, and it was alien to liberal and democratic values. Moreover, violence was associated with allegedly backward elements – the masses were always implicitly feminine, lower class, uncivilised and perhaps Eastern

or non-European – Le Bon himself had likened the crowd to a woman, and he saw the 'Latin crowd as the most febrile of all'.[1] Using these concepts, therefore, liberals and democrats could easily attribute violence to the same backward elements, perhaps again to 'the East'. This explanation of violence persisted partly because there was apparently so much evidence to confirm it, for both Hitler and Mussolini cited Le Bon in support of their methods of rule, while Lenin's ideas about the openness of the group mind to simple images and violence hardly differed from Le Bon's.[2] For Lenin, the Bolsheviks, not liberals, were the true elite who would bring the good out of the crowd. In fact, in different ways all sides used crowd psychology to explain political behaviour – everyone was somebody else's demagogue.

The historiographical legacy of crowd psychology

Contemporary historians usually avoid the overt prejudices of the earlier 20th century. However, the methodological assumptions of progress narratives and crowd psychology persist. In spite of – perhaps because of – their unfalsifiability, they have remained integral for many years to scholarly explanations of violence. They were vital to the totalitarianism thesis, according to which extremists resort to violence when their attempts to implement a utopian ideology encounter the obstacle of the imperfectability of man. Similar assumptions inform political religions theory, an updated version of totalitarianism theory, in which the high priests of ideology seek to sacralise the state and create a 'new man'; the dissolution of old certainties in crisis conditions leads to the invention of substitute secular religions as a way of recovering society's lost wholeness, and violence results from the demonisation of enemies.[3] One may also point to the brutalisation thesis, developed by some historians of the First World War, according to which war is a 'great revelator', making visible impulses that are normally buried in the unconscious of the masses. Thus, in the stresses of war, the rational constraints of modern society break down, provoking troops to brutal excess. For Annette Becker, the extreme experience of war leads to catharsis and reveals conditions of normal experience that familiarity usually blocks.[4] Finally, at one time much work on social movements was also carried out using similar assumptions about collective behaviour.[5] However, since the 1960s, a great deal of sociological and historical work, beginning with that of Charles Tilly, Carlo Ginzberg, Georges Rudé, E. P. Thompson and others, has demolished the legacy of crowd psychology in sociology. It shows that people in crowds do not lose their minds, and that violence

is exceptional and rarely irrational. Although in crisis situations normal routines are disrupted (for example, strikes may disrupt the routine of going to work) and the consequences of one's actions are harder to predict, people continue nevertheless to operate in the same constructed rationality.[6] Yet the methods of crowd psychology strangely persist in some approaches to political violence.

Another problem with methods inherited from crowd psychology is the distinction between the modern West and the backward, violent East. This contrast may be reinforced by misuse of the comparative method, for it may encourage the use of supposed differences of nature (and sometimes of the national stereotypes that were integral to theories of the collective mind) to explain differences that are actually relative and depend on what one compares with what.[7] To take one example, Antoine Prost argues for a fundamental distinction between French and German political culture. In France, he argues, the victory at the dawn of the 20th century of the defenders of Alfred Dreyfus, falsely convicted by a military tribunal for spying, ensured that the rights of the individual took primacy over raison d'état. Although French Catholics were largely anti-Dreyfusards, most of them ultimately agreed that the state had to live by the same moral principles as the individual. This principle of justice survived among the soldiers of the First World War. As citizens they could not accept summary executions, and throughout the interwar years they campaigned for rehabilitation of the victims. In Germany, in contrast, the perpetrators of summary justice were amnestied, and so violence for political ends was accepted. For Prost, that reflects not only the circumstances of defeat, but also the legitimacy of the use of force in German prewar political culture. Moreover, the feeling of belonging to a national community was paramount for the Germans, whereas for the French, as believers in the primacy of the individual, patriotism was compatible with the love of humanity. Consequently, there was no equivalent in France of Pan-Germanism or of the demand for *lebensraum*. Both French and German veterans did espouse a cult of manly heroism, but in France it was contained by the democratic culture and the desire to reconcile the warring classes, while in Germany, war was transferred into civil war.[8] John Stevenson has developed similar arguments for Britain.[9] In fact, had Prost compared France with Britain, he would have needed to explain the greater degree of violence in French political culture relative to Britain. While comparatists usually reject the idea of a national psychology (or political culture) in principle, the assumption that nation-states are the containers and ultimate focus of

political conflict leads them to generalise about national characteristics to explain differences.

Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau place less emphasis on pre-existing political cultures. For them, the war brutalised the soldiers of all the belligerent states, but the experience of defeat and social disaggregation in Russia, Italy and Germany led to the emergence of totalitarianism there. In Germany, there was a similar transfer from war to 'peace', for the population did not believe itself to have been defeated and saw the Versailles Treaty as an unjust imposition, made possible by the treachery of German socialists. Consequently, the National Socialists saw political violence as the precondition of a new war, for the nation must first be purged of its enemies and of any obstacle to the pursuit of war. Furthermore, the industrialised warfare of the trenches and the pervasive racism of wartime propaganda became the bureaucratic implementation and regulation of the Holocaust. In France, in contrast, victory permitted the millenarian hopes of war to be transferred into equally millenarian pacifism. The French 'repressed' the horrors of war, and one consequence was that they were blind to and disarmed before the totalitarian projects of Hitler.[10] While there was nothing inevitable about this course of events, Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau see a difference in nature between France and Germany.

Michael Mann, in his *The Dark Side of Democracy* (1999), makes similar assumptions. In principle, his brand of historical sociology owes much to critics of concepts derived from crowd psychology. Yet he uses a broad generalisation about the differences between Western pluralism and Eastern European ethnic definitions of the nation to explain the greater prevalence of violence in the latter. He accepts that Western nations could be extremely violent in colonial settings, but domestically the gradual extension of the franchise allowed for competing interests to be absorbed into the system without generating violence. In Eastern Europe, the nation was defined in ethnic terms, and democracy emerged suddenly, so there was no room to accommodate and negotiate dissent within the nation. To sustain this thesis, Mann argues that the violence of Stalinism was an outgrowth of nationalism rather than class conflict. Such an interpretation closes off, for instance, investigation of the influence of the Bolshevik model of violence in countries throughout Western Europe. After all, Lenin's philosophy owed much to his understanding of the French insurrectionary socialist tradition, and Bolshevism prospered in France, Italy and Spain partly because it fastened on to revolutionary syndicalist traditions of direct action. In fact, it is not easy to contain ideas or the practice of political violence within clear geographical frontiers.

Transnational history

Transnational methods have transformed the study of European history generally and of political violence in particular. One of the best examples of this new work is Robert Gerwarth's study of the Eastern European counterrevolution, in which he posits the existence of a space of violence including contiguous areas of Austria, Hungary and Germany, where, after the end of the First World War, law and order broke down and violence claimed tens of thousands of lives. Gerwarth details the extensive contacts between counterrevolutionaries and their attempts to establish a common anticommunist front. Shared experience of war and above all 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 years'. Out of this transnational space emerged a new kind warrior, free from moral restraint, who was ready to carry out 'bloody rituals of retribution against real and imagined enemies'. The enemies in question were, of course, the Bolsheviks, and so the counterrevolution was also part of a wider movement that included Russia, the Ukraine, Finland and Italy. However, Gerwarth argues, counterrevolutionaries in Austria, Germany and Hungary shared a mental map, shaped by common opposition to Western democracy and to the Slavic world.[11]

Gerwarth's argument that defeat and the collapse of authority produced a much greater degree of violence in this non-national space is convincing. However, it raises some questions. Where transnational methods posit the existence of spaces defined by a particular set of characteristics, historians may be tempted to distinguish these spaces from others using generalisations, just as they did nations. Although Gerwarth does not take this step, his interpretation carries the danger of reiterating the East–West distinction. A more productive transnational method begins with the socially and culturally constructed realities of protagonists, with purposive action that takes place through the use of solidarities of various scales from personal networks and local solidarities through the national to the transnational. These scales do not coincide, and so national, international and local references will always be entangled. Together with the insights of contemporary cultural history, these methods allow us to see that certain of the transnational conflicts identified by Gerwarth were both locally specific and spread across Europe and the world. Political violence was not entirely absent from any part of Europe, without its meaning or consequences being anywhere identical. Rather than use the relative absence of violence in democratic Western countries as a reason to ignore it as a subject, the

essays in this volume endeavour to explain what the place of violence actually was. In so doing, the essays problematise the East–West distinction, along with the frontiers between democracy and extremism, and the left and the right.

Blurring the frontiers of violence

There is no doubt that the victorious democracies (insofar as they *were* democracies), especially Belgium, Britain and France, witnessed less violence on their national soil than did the defeated states. However, the major purpose of this collection of essays is to qualify (not reject) the notion of an exclusively Eastern zone of political violence. Particularly important in this respect is the significance that we have accorded to Italy – or more precisely to Northern Italy. Robert Gerwarth mentions Italy only in passing, and yet it was contiguous with his own counterrevolutionary space. The violent practices of the fascists originated precisely on the frontier with the collapsed Habsburg Empire. Here too, counterrevolutionaries attacked Slavs, at a time when Italy disputed control over Trieste and Fiume with Slovenes and Croats, respectively. Subsequently, as Mark Jones reminds us in this collection, fascists directed their violence against socialists in Northern Italy, first in the towns, then in the cities. The fascist squads also played a crucial part in ensuring that the Fascist Party won power. The March on Rome was not a charade; the squads threatened to displace the police, army and liberal political class, and Mussolini approved, for he knew that disorder was a weapon with which to blackmail the government. He won power because he and the fascists were indispensable in both parliamentary majorities and in the conflicts in town and countryside. Paramilitaries elsewhere in Eastern and Central Europe did not manage an equivalent feat, even though the degree of violence was greater than in Italy. In Germany, as Mark Jones points out, the pact between the Socialist government and the army ensured that the state survived through the use of massive force – which he compares to the 'founding violence' of other democratic republics in the French Revolution and more recently in Eastern Europe. In Germany, the state asserted its will against radicals of both the right and the left, and subsequently, violence declined, yet at the same time it increased in Italy. Fascists took upon themselves the repression of the socialists, for the liberal state was supposedly incapable of restoring order on its own.

Mussolini's success is precisely why fascism impressed Western European anticommunists more than similar movements in Germany,

Austria or Hungary did – even though previously Western European conservatives had hardly considered Italy a model to follow. In spite of the generally negative stereotypes of Italy espoused by people in north-western Europe, it was nevertheless usually considered to be a part of the West, at least in its Roman Imperial past, and therefore not wholly irrelevant. Moreover, the wave of admiration for Mussolini focused especially on the myth that he had saved his country from communism. And although most conservatives said that Fascism was not suitable for their own countries, they nonetheless admired or at least excused its violence. Enthusiasts were found in all the democratic countries. As Mark Jones points out, defeated German radicals such as Adolf Hitler saw Mussolini's success in winning power as an example to be imitated, all the more so as the practitioners of violence in both countries shared similar concerns, such as anticommunism and dislike of the Versailles Treaty. The Nazis incorporated some of the rituals of fascism into their own practices, notably the use of flags, the Roman salute and the leader cult.[12] To develop Jones's point further, the Sturmabteilung (SA) could never count on the connivance of the police to the extent that the Fascists could. The National Socialists did not attempt to destroy the left before they came to power.[13] The SA's electoral action was at least as important as its violence. SA violence did help convince German conservatives that only the inclusion of Hitler in the government would put an end to disorder in the streets. But the importance of elections in Germany and the limits of violence underline that Germany too belonged to the circle of democracies – even if democracy was not the only framework relevant to contemporaries.

The impossibility of confining the practice of violence to Eastern Europe is underlined by the attraction of communism in democratic countries. Like fascism, the appeal of communism derived partly from its success in having achieved through armed insurrection what democratic socialists had failed to achieve electorally. Moreover, as constituents of an international organisation, communist parties were subject to the intervention of a group of transnational experts in revolutionary tactics, who referred constantly to the precedents of the victory in Russia while seeking to take account of national peculiarities. Of course, if one defines Germany as 'not democratic', then extensive recourse to violence on the part of communists can be bracketed off from the democratic West. But if instead we see Germany as a field of conflict between competing ideologies and practices with transnational dimensions, then a more nuanced picture emerges. For instance, if we abandon hindsight, then we might focus less on the open

and systematic violence of the founding years of the Weimar Republic (which, as Mark Jones points out, is not necessarily unusual in democracies anyway), than on the 'clash violence' (Zusammenstoff) of the relatively stable years of the mid to late 1920s. In that period, disruption of meetings, fighting between newspaper sellers and violence in strikes was common in Germany. Even after 1929, communist activists concentrated their violence on the Brownshirts rather than on the Social Democrats, who were according to party doctrine, just as important an enemy.[14] Communist violence in Germany was not therefore entirely divorced from patterns in democratic countries, and neither was it completely different from that in France in the 1930s or even the 1920s. Indeed, in France too, communist activists, whether male or female, were expected to put their bodies on the line in street brawls and demonstrations and to risk imprisonment.[15] In 1928–1929, French communists embarked on a violent turn as part of the Comintern's 'class against class' tactic. Historians have rightly emphasised that this strategy weakened the party.[16] However, the shift to defence of democracy in the subsequent Popular Front period was not accompanied by a decline in actual violence. What changed was that violent counterdemonstrations against fascists were presented as a way to restore order. Neither democracies nor democrats rejected violence unequivocally.

Indeed, Sven Reichardt's contribution situates violence in relation to broader tendencies in Western culture. He argues that the First World War undermined constraints on violence understood both as physical and as symbolic, evident in fields from sports through industry and physical drill to film and dance. He relates the emergence of paramilitaries to the experiences of a generation who grew up during the war, but were too young to fight. They were alienated from their fathers, whose broken minds and bodies contradicted the official myth of the heroic soldier, and were attracted instead to the culture of the streets. These young men also modelled themselves on the images of perfect male bodies that were prevalent in representations of sport and the cinema, and on the contemporary mode for harmonisation, regulation and rationalisation of the social body. Reichardt's chapter draws upon Pierre Bourdieu's and Michel Foucault's claims that Western society was marked by symbolic violence and disciplinary power that shaded easily into actual violence. However, he takes pains to establish that whatever they shared, the left and the right did not use violence in the same way or give it the same meaning. The SS (Schutzstaffel) took violence to its furthest extreme, and, we might add, the fact that they gained power owed more to context than to underlying national predisposition to violence.

While it is true that domestic politics in Belgium, the Netherlands, France and especially Britain did not witness the same degree of violence as Northern Italy or Hungary, it was not completely absent. Annette Finley-Croswhite and Gayle K. Brunelle's study of the Cagoule suggests that the turn to terrorist violence in France stemmed from the absence of a democratic outlet for the far right. The left won the elections of 1936, and immediately dissolved the far right leagues. The Cagoule therefore aimed to achieve its ends through terror, not by killing its enemies, but by sending a message to survivors that the Third Republic was ungovernable and that only a dictatorship could save it. But if the Cagoule's origins lay in the political weakness of the extreme right, that does not mean that it was unimportant. Finley-Croswhite and Brunelle show also that the Cagoule was part of a network that included arms smuggling and had ramifications in Switzerland, Italy and Spain. The Cagoule was part of an international struggle between communists and their opponents. Spain was especially important to the Cagoule, and it kept arms depots and a safe house across the border. The chapters by Daniel Tilles and Stéfanie Prezosio remind us how important the Spanish Civil War was for democrats in Europe.

Kristian Mennen shows that German and Dutch social democrats were equally happy to use marches and flags, and both evaluated the question of violence by drawing on the same field of norms. Mennen focuses especially on debates among socialists in the two countries on how to face fascism. Although the danger of fascism was far greater in Germany, the arguments deployed by socialists were very similar in both cases, all the more so as Dutch activists cited German precedents. Some used the alleged difference between political cultures to say that fascism could never become significant in the Netherlands, while others countered that Italy and Germany were also different, and that in both countries fascism had at one time been insignificant there too. Once fascism had come to power in Germany, the Dutch socialists concluded from the passivity of the German Social Democratic Party that democracy was a higher ideal worth fighting for. This idea led to support for the Austrian socialists' battle against a reactionary government in 1934, and for Spanish republicans. Paradoxically, though, the Dutch socialists cut all ties with paramilitaries in the Netherlands. This new stance was accompanied by condemnation of right and left totalitarians, who allegedly used violence for its own sake. As Mennen concludes, 'Instead of defining "Dutch" and "German" in advance and trying to find confirmation for the difference between the two countries in the past', it is more useful 'to foreground the ideas of historical actors and observers in order to determine what was specifically

"German" or "Dutch" '. That method shows that understandings of violence were more fluid than the concept of national political cultures allows.

The point is confirmed by Chris Millington's study of violence in meetings in France. He shows that political meetings were regulated both by written laws that were meant to ensure that they allowed democratic debate and by the unwritten law that political groups would attempt to use these legal provisions to disrupt their opponents' meetings. Moreover, behaviour in meetings was governed by conventional norms of masculinity, often drawn from sport, notably fencing, and speakers felt honour bound to demonstrate courage through speaking on hostile terrain. This violence was by no means confined to the extremes. The account of a violent meeting with which Millington's chapter begins sets against each other a left-liberal deputy and a conservative who was known both for opposing the fascist proclivities of the Jeunesses Patriotes in the name of parliamentary conservatism, and yet for using this league as the backbone of his own political organisation. Millington concludes that 'violence was perfectly acceptable as long as it was interpreted and represented in a specific way and it was but one component in a group's repertoire of propaganda methods and action', and notes that similar practices could be found, to different degrees, in Britain and Germany.

Kristian Mennen comments that, in the Netherlands and Germany, the development of democratic civil society did not necessarily lead to greater social peace. Comparison with France and with Tilles' account of violence in London suggests that democracy regulates violence rather than eliminating it completely or making it entirely safe. The point is especially clear in Jonas Campion's study of policing violence in Belgium. In that country, violence happened within a largely peaceful society, particularly in demonstrations and strikes, but nevertheless it represented an illegal means to change society. As elsewhere, this violence was well structured and obeyed implicit rules. Arguably, the gendarmes' expertise was part of a phenomenon of 'protest codification', and gendarmes and protestors confronted each other using rules that were known on both sides but not necessarily observed. Protestors also knew at what point they would provoke a firm response from the gendarmerie and judicial apparatus.

Another reason to qualify the idea of Western countries as non-violent is that some of them possessed colonial empires. The Dutch did not complete the conquest of Indonesia until 1920 and in 1926 they responded to a communist rising by exiling thousands. Belgian