

Paramilitary Violence

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While World War I featured the largest armies ever assembled, it was also fought by unprecedented numbers of paramilitary fighters. In a situation where the line between combatant and non-combatant was fluid, so was the line between paramilitary fighter and civilian, and the post-war paramilitaries often directed their extraordinary levels of violence at civilian victims. Attributed to the brutalizing effects of war, the shattering of prewar empires, and the anti-Bolshevik counter-revolution, paramilitarism devastated Central and Eastern Europe for years after peace was formally concluded.

Table of Contents

- [1 Introduction](#)
- [2 The Causes and Nature of Paramilitary Violence](#)
- [3 Case Studies](#)
 - [3.1 The Balkans](#)
 - [3.2 Russia](#)
 - [3.3 Germany](#)
 - [3.4 Hungary](#)
- [4 Conclusion](#)
- [Notes](#)
- [Selected Bibliography](#)
- [Citation](#)

Introduction

Until recently, the narrative of World War I has been characterized by the massive mobilization of troops by combatant states; the horrors and tedium of trench warfare; the static battle lines that barely moved over the course of the war; and the war's end with the defeat of [Germany](#), sealed by the armistice and confirmed at the [Paris Peace Conference](#). As historians redirected their attention to other theaters of conflict, many of these aspects of World War I have proven misleading, if not altogether inappropriate as generally defining characteristics. The history of paramilitary conflict during and after World War I, most of which occurred in Eastern and Southern Europe, illustrates the vastly different experience of the war outside the Fields of Flanders. In this conflict, the battlefield and the non-combatant zone existed in a permeable space occupied by millions of paramilitary fighters capable of extraordinary violence.

The Causes and Nature of Paramilitary Violence

While the last shot was fired on the [Western Front](#) on 11 November 1918, nearly all of Europe east of the Rhine remained embroiled in armed, mostly paramilitary conflict for months and even years afterwards. Rather than regular armies fighting each other, much of the violence was perpetrated by formations not formally connected to states. In part, this is a subjective distinction; after all, many paramilitary forces view themselves (and are viewed by others) as either adjunct to existing or as

future states. The uncertainty of the definition speaks to the considerable variety of forces fighting in Europe beyond the formal battlefield, including former soldiers fighting in the name of emergent nation states, [revolutionary](#) or counter-revolutionary forces fighting for or against Communism, committed ideologues, and mercenaries. Moreover, paramilitary violence existed alongside other forms of violence such as revolutionary unrest, protests, state repression of internal violence, and ordinary criminality.

Even if the distinction between paramilitary and other forms of violence in Europe was not always clear, the fact remains that violence perpetrated by forces other than arms of the state was a significant factor both during the war and after peace had officially been declared. This violence differed substantially from more traditional military violence. First, paramilitary violence often occurred in undefined spaces of combat rather than more-or-less clearly outlined battlefields. Second, the boundary between soldier and civilian was a porous one. Lacking an orderly conscription process, paramilitaries included men who moved back and forth between their civilian and military lives. Third, it was possible to switch sides as conflicts evolved. In famously multi-sided conflicts, such as the eruptions in the [Ukraine](#), individuals and units could and did switch loyalties. Finally, because paramilitary conflicts were often fought on grounds not clearly designated as a battle zone, the possibility of civilian casualties and deaths was considerably higher.

Paramilitarism was not new to Europe in the 20th century. Indeed, irregular armies had been an integral part of the Napoleonic Wars (1803-1915), and, depending on a definition of terms, much of the violence that had been committed during the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) might be considered paramilitary in nature. Just as much as World War I marked a different kind of military conflict, the paramilitary fighting in its aftermath, too, was quantitatively and qualitatively different from that which had occurred in past centuries.

Over the course of the 19th century, violence had become nationalized. On the one hand, this meant that an increasing number of states claimed the monopoly on the use of violence, with national armies and universal conscription becoming the norm.^[1] On the other, wars of national liberation were often perpetrated by irregular, paramilitary forces, as was the case in [Greece](#) in the 1820s or with [Giuseppe Garibaldi's](#) (1807-1882) forces in [Italy](#) in the mid-19th century. World War I saw the culmination of both of these trends. The war featured massive national armies; however, the symbolic function of paramilitaries as sources of political authority recalled the earlier role that such groups had played in the emergent states of the 19th century.

In other respects, however, the paramilitary conflicts that accompanied the end of World War I represented a discontinuity with the past rather than a link with previous conflicts. The most obvious difference was that of scale. If one includes the [Russian Civil War](#) (1917-1922), the level of paramilitary violence in World War I approached that committed by regular armies. Furthermore, these paramilitaries were fighting in less familiar territories than had been the case during the 19th century wars of national liberation, given the number of new states emerging in the territories that had formerly belonged to the Hohenzollern, Habsburg and Romanov dynasties. Finally, in an era of big battles that could last months, paramilitary violence was both episodic and often perpetrated by small scale gangs, rather than gargantuan armies.

Historians have found several possible explanations for the wave of paramilitary violence that occurred in the aftermath of World War I. One such set of explanations focuses on the brutalizing force of the war itself.^[2] While this model has been criticized for its inability to explain the relatively peaceful aftermath of the conflict in countries such as [France](#) or [Britain](#), it is true that politics across the continent were militarized to a greater degree in the 1920s and 1930s than had been the case in preceding decades.

Other approaches have focused on particular regions that were paramilitary hotspots. One argument put forth examines the "mobilizing power of defeat" and the failure of [demobilization](#).^[3] Authors have argued that the humiliation of defeat meant that those on the losing end of military conflict struggled with being reintegrated into the nation politically and emotionally. While this might explain why Germans, for example, were potentially more drawn to engagement in paramilitary conflict than the French, it does not explain why citizens of new states such as [Poland](#) or [Czechoslovakia](#)- nations that were "winners" at the peace negotiations in Paris, if not necessarily on the battlefield- were often participants in paramilitary violence; nor does it explain the paramilitary violence that occurred in [Ireland](#) during these years. Refining the theory, [Robert Gerwarth](#) and [John Horne](#) stressed the need to consider the regional process of demobilization instead of looking only at the national one, noting that residents from contested border regions were considerably more likely to engage in paramilitary activity than those from more peaceful parts of the continent.^[4]

A third explanatory model focuses on the class background of participants in paramilitary violence, rather than on their wartime

experiences. Some authors have argued that members of paramilitaries were likely to come from social strata compromised by the new democratic order of post-war Europe. Lower middle and middle class men turned to violence when they saw their livelihoods threatened by social and economic forces.^[5] Other research has challenged these arguments, showing that supporters of political violence came from a variety of class backgrounds.^[6] Moreover, the fact that members of paramilitaries often saw their violent activities disavowed by family members suggests that purely class-based explanations of paramilitary violence are insufficient. Nevertheless, this work serves as a good reminder that the immediate political situation alone offers only an incomplete explanation for the rise of post-war paramilitarism.

A fourth approach focuses less on the role of the war or the demobilization process, but instead emphasizes the process of nation-state formation that occurred in the so-called "shatterzone of empires," the space between [the collapsing Habsburg, Hohenzollern, and Romanov dynasties](#). In the argument, the disappearance of stable states left a power vacuum that was filled by paramilitary forces, often intent on shaping the post-war order. This theory improves on the generalizing tendencies of both the "brutalization" and the "defeat" theses but it, too, has its shortcomings. For one, a focus on the disappearance of state authority still does not explain where and how that authority was reconstituted, and offers no analysis of the relationship between new states and paramilitaries. Also, this theory alone cannot explain why various regions within the broader shatterzone experienced substantially different levels of violence. For example, the German-Czech border was largely quiet during this period, while Ukrainian territory was subject to extreme paramilitary violence. Furthermore, while the shatter zone-theory assumes that nascent nation states were primarily responsible for violence, the level of brutality was often greatest in weakly nationalized areas, such as the Ukraine.

In this case, it is important to keep the role of the Paris Peace Conference in mind. With little impetus to intervene in conflicts that they neither understood nor had any particular interest in, the diplomats in Paris often bowed to whoever de facto controlled a particular territory.^[7] This provided an incentive for paramilitary groups to fight to provide their diplomatic representatives with the best possible case. In situations where plebiscites were to be held at a later point to determine the affiliation of disputed regions, paramilitaries could and did play a significant role. However, in cases where state borders were independent of the defeated central powers, the Paris Peace Conference was of little or no importance. Poland's borders in the west, for example, were set by the [Treaty of Versailles](#), with several areas subject to plebiscites in the following years. However, its southern and eastern borders were fought over and decided in battle. Both borderlands witnessed substantial levels of paramilitary violence, but the violence on Poland's western frontier was generally more organized and more nationalized, while paramilitary violence in the east appeared more chaotic and harder to ascribe to purely nationalist motives. In a sense, this confirms the "shatterzone of empires" thesis; however, it does so on a micro- rather than a macro-level, with local variations being more important than broader transnational trends.

Another cause which should be considered alongside the aforementioned factors is the role that Communist ideology played alongside and in complex interaction with the politics of emergent nation-states. The Russian Civil War represents one of the most important arenas for paramilitary conflict in post-war Europe; spillover effects from that conflict into nearby states contributed to the spreading of violence across the region. Revolutionary socialism represented not only an alternative to nation-state-based parliamentary democracy.^[8] Instead, class conflict and national self-determination interacted in complex and often unpredictable ways that raised the level of violent conflict in some cases, such as in the Ukraine.^[9] A shared sense of anti-Bolshevik mission affected paramilitaries across the region, and, indeed, there was what might be termed a kind of paramilitary anti-Bolshevik international.^[10] Hungarian paramilitary forces often had the backing of Austrian money and arms. Austrians fought for "Germandom" on the Polish-German frontier, and Germans fought Bolsheviks in the Baltics. Here, too, national loyalties were less important than a regionally defined anti-Bolshevik identity. The shatterzone was determined by its geographical and ideological space, indeterminately located between Moscow and Paris. Finally, it is important to keep in mind that anti-Bolshevism was a multi-faceted notion. Among German [Freikorps](#) fighting in the Baltics, for example, anti-Bolshevism provided an alibi that masked a wide variety of motivations, ranging from a quest for adventure, over the desire to escape from a defeated and republican Germany, to the wish to gain a geopolitical advantage for the home-country.^[11]

As this example suggests, no single cause can offer an adequate explanation that encompasses the prevalence, nature or effect of paramilitary violence that occurred in the years between 1917 and 1923. Instead, a combination of psychological and sociological factors, such as the brutalization after years of warfare; political factors, the power vacuum created by the end of empires; and the search for political advantage at a time of regional uncertainty all played a role in creating a climate conducive

to the development of paramilitarism.

Recent research has focused on France as a counterexample to those nations which experienced large amounts of paramilitary violence after World War I. Like many of these countries, France, too, was home to a considerable number of veterans, and the end of the war was accompanied by militant left-wing politics. The French also continued to have a somewhat ragged eastern border, with a restive population in annexed [Alsace-Lorraine](#) and with intentions for other German territories east of the Rhine. However, France never witnessed significant levels of paramilitary violence. John Horne has attributed this to a combination of the success of actual revolution in France, the sense of prestige that France's victory lent to its army and state, and a generally stable political culture that relegated violent ideological conflict to its margins.^[12] This example attests to the fact that conditions and causes for paramilitary violence were too complex to ascribe to any single circumstance.

While paramilitary conflicts took place beyond the 1914-1918 timeframe usually assigned to the First World War, the era of paramilitary violence finally came to an end around 1922-1923. At that point, the Europe's new states had more or less established their borders, either through warfare or treaties. Moreover, these new states finally began to recover from the paroxysms of violence and instability that had accompanied their emergence. The establishment of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1922, a marker of Soviet-German rapprochement marked by the Treaty of Rapallo in that same year; as well as the Treaty of Lausanne, which defined the Turkish Republic's territory, all happened in the scope of this attempt to re-establish normality.

Paramilitary violence was a widespread and common occurrence throughout Europe, and exhaustive cataloguing of every local conflict is beyond the scope of this essay. However, it is worth considering a few cases in greater detail, which demonstrate certain regional particularities of the general phenomenon discussed above: the Balkans, [Russia](#), Germany, Hungary and Ireland.

Case Studies

The Balkans

The [assassination of Franz Ferdinand, Archduke of Austria-Este \(1863-1914\)](#) that precipitated the outset of World War I was itself an episode of paramilitary violence. Just as the Balkan region was ushering in an era of nationalist conflict in the wake of a declining [empire](#), the Balkans, too, became a site of paramilitary violence in the first years of the 20th century. Throughout the 19th century, Balkan paramilitarist organizations came into existence, competing for control of the inexorably weakening Ottoman states' territory along national lines. Bulgarians and Macedonians established the [Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization](#) (IMRO) in 1893. Two years later, the IMRO set up *čete*, small armed units to foment nationalist impulses and fight the Ottoman authorities. By 1902, *čete* were operating in [Serbia](#) as well. During the [Balkan Wars of 1912-1913](#), *čete* were used by both Serbs and Bulgarians, along with regular army forces. Even though Serbia and Bulgaria fought on opposite sides during World War I, both countries shared the experience of how thin the line between regular armies and paramilitaries was throughout the conflict.^[13]

In this sense, paramilitaries appear to be inseparable from dynamics of nationalization in the region. Balkan paramilitaries provide evidence for the theory that World War I was not the single cause for the rise of paramilitary violence in Europe. The increase in Balkan paramilitaries in the shatterzone, brought about by decreasing Ottoman influence in Europe, supports theories that connect the decline of transnational empires to the growth of paramilitarism. After the end of World War I, however, paramilitary forces continued to be active both in victorious Serbia (called "[Yugoslavia](#)" from 1919) and defeated Bulgaria alike.^[14] The IMRO made the transition to the post-war period and dominated Bulgarian politics throughout the early 1920s.

Meanwhile, the stronger Serbian/Yugoslav state was able to subdue the IMRO.^[15] Elsewhere in the Balkans, a potent mix of Italian and Croatian resentment coupled with practical ties fueled the rise of new paramilitary groups in ways that echo the transnational networks at play in North Central Europe. Finally, after World War I, Leninist Communism was brought to the region, exacerbating the divide between the left and right in the IMRO and embedding the area within the increasingly global fight between Communist and anti-Communist forces.^[16]

Russia

Historians insist that it is necessary to examine and understand the war and the revolution as parts belonging to a single period of extreme crisis in Russia.^[17] In this context, violence of all kinds, but especially paramilitary violence, served as a continuum that links all facets of the conflict.^[18] Russia is a prime example of a country in which lines between political ideology, [nationalism](#), and resentments between social groups are not neatly separated. William Rosenberg emphasizes that, in addition to these factors, historians must also take the severe material deprivation that the Russian people suffered during the war and revolutionary period under consideration in their analyses. The combination of ideological ambiguity and physical suffering contributed to the escalation of violence as "instability degenerat[ed] into a raw struggle for collective and individual survival."^[19]

Russia entered into World War I with massive military mobilization, the size and speed of which initially distracted from significant problems with provisions and logistics. These problems exploded into public consciousness with the Great Retreat of 1915, when German forces overwhelmed Russia's lines, triggering a disastrous and violent retreat of both the civilian and military population of the nation's western borderlands.^[20] Significantly, the Great Retreat took place in a part the country's ethnically mixed border regions, populated by Poles, Ukrainians, Balts, Germans and Jews, who already had a conflicted relationship with the central state. The Great Retreat was not only a military disaster for the Russian Empire, but also a social and political one. Civilians experienced soldiers as marauding gangs, out to plunder and displace them. Soldiers, on the other hand, experienced the chaos and ineptitude of the state directly. Despite official chains of command that centralized authority in Saint Petersburg, local commanders often functioned as free agents.^[21] Military officials, such as the senior staff officer General [Nikolai Ianushkevich \(1868-1918\)](#), made a reality of their plans to "ethnically cleanse combat regions with little military or civilian oversight."^[22] In spirit, if not in name, much of the violence unleashed upon the Russian (often minority) population by the Russian army during the Great Retreat was paramilitary, and it turned out to be an important precondition for the more clearly paramilitary violence that would take place as the Russian Empire collapsed.

The Great Retreat, of course, was only the beginning of the end for the Romanov dynasty. By February 1917, it had collapsed entirely, leaving [Alexander Kerensky's \(1881-1970\)](#) government in control of the apparatus of state control, as well as the war effort. The chaos and anarchy that had come to characterize combat zones from 1915 now marked the rest of the territory that had once comprised the Russian Empire.

In 1917, a number of factors came together to aggravate the level of paramilitary violence happening across Russian territory. On the frontlines, local commanders increasingly seized control. The [Cossack](#) commander of the Southwestern Front, [Lavr Kornilov \(1870-1918\)](#), embodied this phenomenon. In the spring of 1917, he was using terror to control the population in Galicia and did not even pay lip service to military or civilian officials ranked above him.^[23] In July, he attempted to take control of the state in Saint Petersburg itself, an event exemplifying the power he had gained as a warlord on the Western Front. Meanwhile, gangs of army deserters and revolutionary Red Guards used the power vacuum and seized control of military and political authority.^[24] Tensions erupted across the ethnically mixed territories that surrounded the Russian heartland.

When the Bolsheviks took control after the [October Revolution](#), this did not mean the end of paramilitarism. On the contrary, the Bolshevik takeover escalated violence on all sides. Starving but well-armed urban workers pillaged the countryside, seeking food. Peasants attacked landholders.^[25] Red Guards, now loosely organized by [Leon Trotsky \(1879-1940\)](#), maintained many paramilitary elements.

The former tsardom fell apart as warlords seized control of territories. In one of the most extreme examples of this chaos, the Ukraine became the site of horrific violence enacted by irregular forces that represented a broad spectrum of national and ideological factions. As Serhy Yekelchuk put it, "the chaotic events of 1917-1920 are best understood not as the struggle of the united Ukrainian people for independence but as a gamut of complex ideological conflicts and local violence unleashed by the collapse of the old dynastic elements."^[26] Elsewhere, large paramilitary armies led by Admiral [Aleksandr Kolchak \(1874-1920\)](#) in the north, and General [Anton Denikin \(1872-1947\)](#) in the south fought against Bolshevik forces from 1918 well into 1919.

By and large, the violence of the Russian Civil War was paramilitary violence. There was little authority anywhere, and even the most successful commanders operated largely beyond the reach of central authority or the rules of war. Historian [Joshua Sanborn](#) has estimated between 50,000 and 200,000 deaths attributable to local warlords in the Ukraine alone in the years between 1918 and 1920.^[27] Social, political and economic resentments turned violent. In some remote towns and settlements in the Ural Mountains, people "joined together in armed local bands with no political goals besides protecting themselves and

driving away the 'outsiders'.^[28] These kinds of bands occasionally consolidated into marauding armies, lacking any clear lines of authority or even political ambitions. They were also exceedingly violent. For example, 300 people were executed in as little as two outlying settlements, massacred by members of the Veshenskaia insurgency in the Don territory.^[29]

The story of Russia's collapse over these years of international warfare, revolution, and civil war makes it clear that violence was both a contributory factor to the situation, as well as its primary expression. Furthermore, the fact that the vast majority of this violence took place outside of conventional militaries, and instead in paramilitary formations of various degrees of formality, attest to the absence of any central authority. Rosenberg suggests that the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War may be partly attributable to its ability to explain the violence it partook in. "When commissars flashed their credentials and their armed Red Guards or Cheka escorts brutally carried out the party's orders, their purpose was still contextualized as part of the higher struggle for 'land,' 'bread,' and the end of capitalism."^[30]

Germany

The German *Freikorps* are some of the most famous examples of post-World War I paramilitarism, and perhaps also among the most misunderstood. For one, they were not the only organ of political paramilitary violence that existed in the Weimar Republic, but part of a spectrum of organizations that were organized and connected to more traditional parties and institutions to varying extents. The German experience with and of paramilitarism was neither as extensive nor as destructive as that had by some of its neighboring countries; however, it was arguably of bigger consequence for the future of Europe.

Unlike Russia or the Balkans, Germany did not experience much paramilitary violence before the end of the war in 1918. However, Germany's defeat, its rapid demobilization and a revolution that immediately segued into a small scale civil war proved fertile ground for the development of paramilitarism. Alongside these factors, there was the Versailles restrictions on the size of the German military, which meant that there was a reservoir of people with military interests and training, many of whom found their way into paramilitary groups.

The fight for power in Weimar Germany took place on many fronts - at the ballot box, in parliament, but also as a paramilitary struggle in the streets. When a new republic was declared in November 1918 by Socialist Philip Scheidemann (1865-1939), it was followed by a similar announcement by the Communist Karl Liebknecht (1871-1919) two hours later. Street battles raged over the next several months and continued sporadically throughout the following years. These street battles roused several categories of paramilitaries, including the *Freikorps*, *Einwohnerwehren* (Home Guards), and the Combat Leagues that were associated with political parties, such as the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* (Socialists), the *Rote Front* (Communists), the *Stahlhelm* (Conservatives), and the *Sturmabteilung* (Nazis).

Two months after the Communist-Spartacist uprising in January 1919, the Defense Ministry called for the formation of local *Einwohnerwehren* (Home Guards), which would both fight Bolshevism in Germany and serve as a reserve for the army, thereby circumventing allied restrictions on the size of the German military. In the aftermath of the 1920 Kapp Putsch, in which right-wing forces attempted a coup against the Republic, the *Einwohnerwehren* were disbanded as they had come to be regarded as a threat to German democracy rather than its last line of defense.

The formation of the *Freikorps* was authorized in December 1918 by the Socialist minister of defense Gustav Noske (1868-1946) as a bulwark against the Communists. *Freikorps* units were generally comprised of World War I veterans, along with a significant number of youths who had been too young to fight in the recently concluded war. A total of approximately 400,000 men fought in the *Freikorps*. Despite being authorized by the regime, the question of how much *Freikorps* violence was motivated by political goals and, in turn, how much these goals served as an alibi for this violence remains. *Freikorps* units were responsible for several spectacular incidents of political violence in Germany, such as the crackdown on the short-lived Soviet Republic in Munich in 1919 and the Kapp Putsch, which nearly toppled the regime in 1920. Many members of the *Freikorps* were drawn to the Nazi Party and participated in Adolf Hitler's (1889-1945) abortive Beer Hall Putsch in 1923. As these examples illustrate, the *Freikorps* were generally oriented towards the political right. However, such a statement oversimplifies a more complex relationship with orthodox political ideology in the years immediately after World War I.

The complexity of the relationship is more apparent when considering those *Freikorps* who operated beyond Germany's borders: those active in the German territories recently ceded to Poland, as well as in the Baltics. The *Freikorps* presence in the Baltics is a reflection of the confused situation in Eastern Europe after the war concluded. The armistice of 11 November 1918

explicitly allowed German troops to remain in the Baltics to combat a potential Soviet incursion into the region. The German 8th Army, however, was not in a state to fulfill this mission on its own. Members had already defected to the Soviets, or simply deserted to return to Germany. In response, *Freikorps* began to put out calls for members to go to the Baltics. Furthermore, the German representative in Latvia negotiated a treaty with the Latvian premier to allow German *Freikorps* soldiers to apply for Latvian citizenship.

In the Baltics in particular, it is clear that political ideology - namely the defense of Western Europe against Bolshevism - was only one factor that motivated 20,000 to 40,000 *Freikorps* recruits to go to the Baltics. Possibly more important was the desire to settle in Latvia and escape the problems in a defeated Germany. Yet, if the *Freikorps* had largely German domestic reasons for their fighting in the Baltics, their actions reflected a notion of Germany's borders as instable and fluid. These actions had consequences that reached beyond Germany's confines, of course. Though hard numbers are hard to come by, the *Freikorps* campaign in the Baltics was exceedingly violent, even more so than *Freikorps* actions in Germany itself. While the *Freikorps* were ultimately pushed out of the region by Estonian and Latvian forces supported by the British, their very involvement in the region shows how intertwined the situations in various countries were.

Back in Germany, the *Freikorps*, fighting alongside regular German military forces, were involved in the bloody suppression of the Munich Soviet Republic in May 1919. *Freikorps* units also participated in other crackdowns on left-wing uprisings, as well as assassinations of political figures, from the Communist leaders Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg (1871-1919), to the Center Party leader Matthias Erzberger (1875-1921).

The 1920 Kapp Putsch, in which conservative officials and *Freikorps* units tried to assume power, only to be stopped by government-called strikes, led into fighting between 50,000 left-wing members of the Red Ruhr Army and government forces. The fighting in the Ruhr was brutally suppressed by the state. While the events represented an escalation of violence, they did not set off a new spiral of brutality. In part, this was because the audacity of the Kapp Putsch led to a diminution in support for those in favor of it. For the first time, the state also recognized the threat posed by right-wing paramilitaries. Both the *Freikorps* and the *Einwohnerwehren* would be disbanded in the Putsch's aftermath.

The majority of paramilitary activity in Germany was associated with the political right rather than the left. The formation of the *Freikorps* and the *Einwohnerwehren* had been authorized by the state, but it soon lost control over the groups. Even more devastating than the lack of control that the state had over these sort of institutions, was the fact that the culture of violence would come to corrupt the political discourse of the Republic, further tainting an already fraught situation. As journalist Emil Julius Gumbel (1891-1966) points out, right-wing violence was also considerably less likely to be punished than left-wing actions, and the tacit acceptance of right-wing paramilitary violence contributed to the lack of legitimacy of the Republic. While Germany largely avoided the extremes of chaos and violence that characterized the situation in Russia, the Republic never overcame the appearance of weakness that paramilitary violence contributed to. The level of violence in Weimar Germany tracked the country's level of political (in)stability. Paramilitary violence persisted, even during the period of the Republic's greatest stability, and would re-emerge as a major problem in the final years of the regime.

Hungary

Much like Russia, Hungary experienced two [revolutions](#) within one year's time - the Democratic Revolution in October 1918 and the Soviet Revolution in March 1919. The Hungarian Soviet Republic collapsed four months later, following the Romanian invasion sanctioned by the Western Allies. This unrest unleashed bloodshed throughout the country, much of which was perpetrated by counter-revolutionary paramilitary forces, the nationally organized *szabadcsapatok* and the local *polgárőrségek*. Although estimates vary, the anti-Bolshevik White Terror cost between 3,000 and 5,000 people their lives - about half of who were Jewish - and led to the imprisonment of 70,000 more. The collapse of the Hungarian Soviet Republic and the ensuing White Terror led to the expulsion of 100,000 Hungarians.^[31]

The post-war Hungarian paramilitaries had their ideological roots in conservative efforts to stave off defeat and revolution in the final days of World War I. The widespread unpopularity of the conservative cause in the immediate aftermath of the war meant that these groups were largely without support in cities and the countryside during the fall and winter of 1918-1919. However, the Soviet takeover in March led to rural uprisings. Peasant counter-revolutionaries would become one of the bases of support for the White Terror that succeeded the defeat of the Soviet regime in August 1919. Much like Russia, Hungary was a largely rural country, and in the hot summer of the same year, the line between peasant uprising and counter-revolutionary paramilitary

became increasingly difficult to draw.

This is not to say that Hungary's White Guards, or counter-revolutionary paramilitaries, consisted solely of radicalized peasants. Former army officers - often from an aristocratic background - made up much of the command apparatus of many new paramilitary organizations. One of the most important units involved in the White Terror, the Prónay Battalion, was controlled by noblemen. The majority of the foot soldiers and commanders, however, rarely came from the upper classes. The similarly important Ostenburg Detachment was led by [Gyula Ostenburg \(1884-1944\)](#), who had married into a noble family but was of middle class origin.^[32]

The Hungarian experience exposes the international nature of post-war paramilitarism. The center of the Hungarian paramilitary movement was initially in Vienna, and counter-revolutionary forces across Central Europe stayed in close contact in the early post-war years, providing each other with arms and logistical support.^[33] The Hungarian experience recalls the German and particularly the Russian one insofar as Hungarian White Terror followed on the Red Terror of [Belá Kun's \(1886–1938\)](#) regime which had been enforced by paramilitary forces. While the White Terror was significantly bloodier than its Red predecessor, a sense of reprisal for Bolshevik crimes provided a motive and alibi for White forces.^[34] Robert Gerwarth has rightly described post-war Central Europe as a "transnational theatre of paramilitary ultra-violence."^[35]

[Miklós Horthy \(1868-1957\)](#) took power with a paramilitary "National Army" under his command. Once in charge though, he grew more ambivalent, seeking to reign by paramilitary excesses to mollify the West, solidify his control, and re-establish social order. Nevertheless, the lines that separated paramilitary organizations and regular forces remained fluid. In part, this was the result of the [Treaty of Trianon](#), which placed restrictions on Hungary's military, and, as in Germany, thereby increased the human resources from which paramilitary units could draw recruits.

Once the Horthy regime and the Romanian army ousted the Hungarian Soviet state, months of White Terror befell first the Hungarian countryside, and, when the Romanians had permitted them to enter the Hungarian capital in November, also in the streets of Budapest.

Military officers in the new state often came from paramilitary groups such as the "Association of Awakening Hungarians" (*Ébredő Magyarok Egyesülete* or ÉME), the "Hungarian Association of National Defense" (*Magyar Országos Véderő Egylet* or MOVE), and the League for the "Defense of Territorial Integrity" (*Területvédelmi Liga*), or they were recruited from areas that were known to have substantial paramilitary support.^[36] In many cases, a direct line can be drawn from service in the Imperial Army, fighting for the paramilitaries of 1919, and service in the National Army established in the aftermath of the 1919 conflicts.

However, paramilitarism in Hungary was not merely a covert continuation of the Austro-Hungarian *kaiserlich und königliche* (k.u.k.) army. Even the elite Prónay Battalion explicitly barred former General Staff officers, insisting that "their functions had been replaced by common sense and radical determination which did not know compromise."^[37] This self-understanding of acting with a greater sense of purpose and purity of intentions than the recently defeated regular army was similar to that of the German *Freikorps*. While this might be viewed as a kind of radicalization, it was not necessarily an ideological one. As the discussion of the *Freikorps* made clear, their sense of determination and radicalism masked a wide spectrum ideological directions, not all of which were identical with radical nationalism.

Rather than differences in composition or command structure, the key distinction between the eras of "ordinary" military belonging and paramilitarism was that the paramilitaries directed their violence towards fellow Hungarians, identifying those they disagreed with as 'the enemy within,' and so resituating wartime hostilities within an apocalyptic domestic context.

Conclusion

In an article on the effect of militarization during wartime, [Michael Geyer](#) observes that "[m]ilitarization originated in civil society, rather than being imposed on it."^[38] The process of militarization is a process of self-organization and expresses the capacity for military action embedded in society even during peacetime. The experience of paramilitarism during and after World War I demonstrates the ragged end of the process of militarization, making it clear that a society's violent impulses and acts do not necessarily disappear the moment peace is formally declared.

two important links between the violence after World War I and the brutality of World War II: one with regards to personnel, and the other with regards to territory. The regions to see the most paramilitary violence after World War I were again subject to the worst of the Second World War. In the territory that Timothy Snyder famously referred to as the "Bloodlands," people were murdered both by organized armies and paramilitaries in the 1940s.^[39]

[Fascist movements](#) throughout Central and Eastern Europe - from the Romanian Iron Guard and the Hungarian Arrow Cross to the Italian and German Fascist states - symbolically and organizationally recalled the paramilitarism of the immediate post-war period. There were continuities in personnel from the *Freikorps* movement to the Nazis, and the Nazis repeatedly referred to the *Freikorps* as their progenitors.^[40]

The continuity that many paramilitarists displayed in following their wartime military service with their paramilitarism, and later their radical political leanings, should not obscure the fact that many members of paramilitary organizations rejoined civilian life as the situation around them normalized. Rather than being permanently radicalized through their paramilitary experiences, these men left the service and reintegrated into civilian everyday existences. The experience of post-war paramilitarism demonstrates the permeability between military, paramilitary and civilian lives and societies. Furthermore, Hungarian fascists largely rejected post-World War I paramilitarists, finding their radicalization to be insufficient.^[41] Even in Nazi Germany, the *Freikorps* legacy was not a simple one. While the Nazis sought to build a museum to the memory of the *Freikorps* and regularly heralded their personal and ideological connections to this earlier period, actual veterans of the *Freikorps* often had a difficult relationship to the National Socialist state.

Another continuous trajectory that can be traced is the identities of the victims of violence. While [anti-Semitic](#) violence did not originate in the years after World War I, it was integral to paramilitary violence of this era. Up to 4,000 Hungarian Jews died in pogroms after the Horthy regime took power.^[42] The infamous Ukrainian pogroms claimed more than 30,000 victims.^[43] Yet these numbers cannot encompass the incredible brutality of the paramilitary war against the Jews, in the scope of which the Hungarian [Pál Prónay \(1874-1944/45?\)](#) collected the severed ears of Jews as good luck charms, and German *Freikorps* dismembered the corpse of the Jewish Communist Rosa Luxemburg.^[44] Beyond the actual violence, the image of the Jewish Bolshevik as the arch enemy of right-wing paramilitarism that emerged would have a lingering influence on political culture in Central Europe, even in circles that eschewed the paramilitary violence of the immediate post-war period.^[45]

Nonetheless, it would be too simplistic to say that post-World War I paramilitarism merely anticipated World War II. Here, it is important to recognize the widespread confusion that reigned in Central and Eastern Europe after World War I, a situation unmatched by anything that occurred in the years that followed. While the concept of a "shatterzone of empires" is by no means an all-encompassing explanation for the violence of the post-war period, it does help to explain the turmoil experienced by both participants and observers. German *Freikorps* member [Ernst von Salomon \(1902-1972\)](#) described his feelings after he was informed of the signing of the Versailles Treaty while in the Baltics as follows:

Where was Germany? In Weimar, in Berlin? At one time it was on the Front, but the front collapsed. Then it was supposed to be in the homeland, but the homeland lied. It called in song and in language, but the tone was false. One spoke from a Fatherland and a Motherland, but the Negro had that too. Where was Germany? Was it with the people? But the people screamed for bread and shook their thick bellies. Was it the state? But the state searched blitheringly for its form and found it in abandonment.^[46]

The disorientation von Salomon expressed reflected the era's sense of instability of politics and identification, which marked it as substantively different from later eras in the 20th century. Testament to this particular notion is the range of state forms, such as the six different states that claimed sovereignty over what would later become the Soviet Republic of the Ukraine. Another indicator is the fact that a significant number of *Freikorps* combatants sought Latvian citizenship. This instability, especially in contrast to the era of tight imperial control that preceded it, would turn out to be an important contributing factor for the rise of paramilitary violence that occurred throughout Europe after the end of World War I.

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Notes

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