

### **Armed Associations and Political Violence in Belle Époque Europe**

**Veranstalter:** Universität Padova (DiSSGeA); European Research Council (ERC)

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The kickoff meeting of the ERC funded project „The Dark Side of Belle Époque. Political Violence and Armed Association in Europe before the First World War“ took place in Padova on 12/13 December 2017. MATTEO MILLAN (Padova) opened the conference with an introduction about the aims and methods of the project. The Belle Époque was retrospectively conceived as a period of peace and progress. By contrast, the Great War and its aftermath were understood as the paradigmatic moment of instability and organized violence. Following this dichotomy, research on political violence has mostly focused on postwar upheavals and paramilitary groups. The project challenges this strong opposition by reassessing the role of armed groups in prewar societies. Organized political violence was more limited and different if compared with the postwar period. However, according to Milan's thesis, the level of everyday violence in Belle Époque Europe had been largely underestimated. Violence was not simply confined to book and pamphlets, to the minds or criminals and reactionaries, or just to the colonies and peripheries of Europe. Violence was mostly regarded as a legitimate course of action to react against internal enemies and instill patriotic values. On the one hand, the widespread political conflicts and the reconfiguration of social hierarchies generated responses from the state. On the other hand, middle-class men increasingly organized volunteer police forces, civil guard, and strikebreaking groups. The project analyzes the shared repertoire in practices and values in those non-state armed associations. These groups rapidly developed in similar or functionally equivalent ways in prewar Europe.

ALESSANDRO SALUPPO (Padova) highlighted the role of the Great Unrest (1910–1914) in undermining the confidence of British society in national cohesion. Labor mi-

litaney and massive strikes with four millions of workers involved were the most tangible expression of this prewar crisis. Despite the absence of direct revolutionary threats, fears of social disintegration among the upper classes constituted a significant psychosocial reality. Heightened social conflicts stimulated jingoistic nationalism and a drastic decline of traditional non-governmental interference in social control. Rapidly growing labor militancy also resulted in the proliferation of strikebreaking groups and vigilante committees. Saluppo's paper aimed at exploring the phenomenon of armed volunteerism building on the case of the Volunteer Police Force (VPF), which was created in 1911. This parapolice corps recruited patriotic-minded citizens in order to protect life and property. More specifically, the VPF was largely used in anti-labor strategies. While the conservative public opinion enthusiastically supported private police and other forms of vigilante behavior, the British authorities were more skeptical but they tolerated non-bureaucratic anti-strike activities because of the widespread perception that ordinary police forces were inadequate to control labor unrest. Although the VPF did not survive the death of its president the Duke of Abercorn in 1913, this case study is representative of the multiplication of anti-labor civilian formations and the support for non-institutionalized repressive practices in late Victorian and Edwardian England.

Traditional interpretations of the French history during the Belle Époque describe a largely peaceful period of democratic reforms with some tensions such as strikes and antisemitism, which did not really threaten the stability of the social and political order. ARNAUD-DOMINIQUE HOUTE (Paris) examined the problem of organized political violence in the French Third Republic. After the humiliating defeat against Prussia, the new French political regime established itself through an exceptional level of violence during the *Semaine Sanglante*. According to Houte, the republican system showed a strong adaptability in the face of various social and political threats. Remarkably, the Third Republic was able to maintain social order with quite moderate strategies of repres-

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sion, which were mostly different from the brutal repression of the Commune. Houte's paper analyzed the case of the gendarmerie and the overall capability of ordinary police forces to prevent revolutionary, or potentially revolutionary, upheavals. Despite widespread revolutionary fears, moderate Republicans and the bourgeoisie felt protected by the state. The enemies of the Republic – from anarchist terrorism to the new far fight – never really threatened the social and political order. Houte highlights that both left and right political violence seems to have been limited in the Third Republic. The protective or repressive behavior of the French state was effective and, therefore, private security or non-institutionalized armed groups were marginal phenomena.

Building on the case of the Fédération Nationale des Jaunes de France, ROMAIN BONNET (Padova) partly reassesses the traditional assumption of a moderate and limited level violence in prewar France. The Jaunes movement was founded in 1902 by the former socialist syndicalist Pierre Biétry. Differently from other European strikebreaking groups, the Jaunes had a national impact and a clear ideological orientation toward corporatism, nationalism and anti-socialism. In 1905, this yellow union intervened to intimidate or repress strikers in the main French industrial areas. Biétry claimed that the movement represented more than half a million workers, and other contemporary sources mentioned very different estimates of the number of Jaunes (between 120.000 and 375.000 members). Following the case-thinking methodology, Bonnet stresses that the Jaunes' organized violence against labor militancy was not only occasional but much more the result of a systematic conception and consequent practices. Since the very beginning of the federation, anti-strike violence as well as nationalist and corporatist propaganda constituted the fundamental part of the Jaunes ideology. Yellow ideas and anti-strike activity were supported by French industrial magnates and tolerated or even explicitly encouraged by politicians and state authorities. The Jaunes constituted a well-networked counter-revolutionary vanguard. Bonnet pointed out that the yellow union's ideology and organi-

zed violence were part of French and European history in the Belle Époque.

LAURENCE COLE (Salzburg) offered a comprehensive historical and conceptual overview of militias and militaristic associations in the Austrian-Hungarian Empire. Although the problem of political violence is not a *question mal posée* for the Austrian case, direct connections between patriotic armed groups and organized political violence, or anti-labor repression were apparently limited. In order to understand to what extent militaristic associations and political violence were connected or disconnected, Cole dedicated the main part of his paper to discuss four broad categories of patriotic associations as well as three different categories of political violence (ideological violence, nationalist violence against other groups and against the state). The first category of patriotic associations was the local militia and the civic guard. These traditional armed groups were seen as instruments to deal against external threats, rather than against internal enemies. Also, military veteran associations – the second category of patriotic groups – were permanently growing in the fin-de-siècle. Since veterans groups promoted pro-Austrian sentiments and social militarization, they were at least indirectly able to support the social and political order. The third group was the national militias established by Polish Socialists, which were subversive organizations paradoxically supported by the Austrian Empire as part of an anti-Czarist movement. The fourth and last category referred to the German national associations. They were concentrated within the so-called language borders and developed a nationalist and martial ideology. Similar groups spread up also in non-German regions such as the widespread Czech gymnastic clubs (Sokol). The state strictly monitored these patriotic associations, which were the combined result of top-down and bottom-up processes.

Building on the case of shooting corps, CLAIRE MORELON (Padova) further analyzed the problem of patriotism and latent violence in Austrian armed associations. The Schützenkorps (local militia) were forces of conservatism composed of middle-class men. Before the war, the shooting corps benefitted

from an official status and the right to collectively bear arms. By contrast, the shooting clubs (Schützenvereine) were only allowed to use arms on the basis of individual gun licenses. Shooting corps played an important role in popularizing military values and organizing public manifestations of patriotism. The tradition of the Schützenkorps was reactivated around the 1900s and gained a new political relevance. On the one hand they demonstrated the existence of a state patriotism from below in the Habsburg Empire and, on the other hand, they were a fundamental part of the bourgeois mobilization in order to defend the social and political order threatened by the Social Democracy (especially after the introduction of the universal suffrage in 1907). Furthermore, the privileges of bearing arms and wearing uniforms generated a potent sign of bourgeois respectability. The bourgeois ethos of the Schützenkorps was closely related with patriotic values, and with the function of these corps to uphold the social order. They were intended to promote state patriotism, dynastic loyalty, and bourgeois respectability. Therefore, the Schützenkorps contributed to the protection of social order in the Habsburg Empire, which could explain the better management of internal violence compared to its neighbors Russia and Romania.

SVEN OLIVER MÜLLER (Tübingen) compared civilian violence in France, Britain, and Germany at the start of the First World War, focusing on the impact of emotions. Violence quickly permeated societies at the home front and made public space increasingly unsafe. The demonization of the figure of the enemy in war propaganda created a new quality of antagonism within the participating societies. Emotions thus offer an interpretative key to analyse in a new light the violent hunt for spies in Germany or the assaults against Germans in Great Britain. Emotions shaped the behaviours of perpetrators, spectators and the police. In Britain, for example, a virulent press campaign whipped up anger against naturalized Germans by presenting them as dangerous traitors. In May 1915, mobs attacked German owned shops in London, sometimes looting and stealing property in the process. The riots also targeted the private homes of Germans, and in some cases simply persons with

German-sounding names. Some 60,000 people suffered during these riots and the police either joined in or was unable to act. Emotions played a crucial role in the creation of these groups and the rise of new „communities of violence“: violent actions were legitimated by appealing to emotions. The violence of civilians against civilians during the First World War involved new culprits and new victims. The similarities across Western Europe suggest the existence of a common European practice of violence.

AMERIGO CARUSO (Padova) presented an understudied aspect of social conflicts in the German Kaiserreich: the delegation of violence by the state to armed groups. After the major strikes of 1889 in the mining sector, Prussian administrators feared that public order could not be maintained during workers' unrest in industrial regions. The police forces were perceived as inadequate and mine-owners in the Ruhr area started to organize industrial protection groups with state support (Zechenwehren). Caruso underlined the apparent paradox that the Prussian state was able to delegate violence precisely because it was confident in its own strength and in the loyalty of the population. These armed groups were composed of employees of the colliery, white-collar workers, and mining supervisors, who were appointed as temporary assistant police officers. Members of the Zechenwehren had to be approved by local authorities, which delivered numerous instructions to them in order to control the delegated violence. Guns and bayonets were provided by the employers and the Prussian authorities tolerated or even actively supported the provision of these strikebreaking groups with weapons. Miners and Social Democratic leaders often denounced the violent practices of the industrial protection groups. However, after the major strikes of 1905, both the number of Zechenwehren and of their members increased. The case of the Zechenwehren demonstrates the overlapping of industrial interests, social order, different conceptions of security, and nationalism in Imperial Germany. The efforts to mobilize and partly delegate the use of violence to „faithful citizens“ emphasized the unity of state power and „loyal classes“ against revolutionary threats.

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During the concluding general discussion, HEINZ-GERHARD HAUPT (Berlin) insisted on the importance of specific conflict structures within societies in explaining the emergence of violence: between Church and State, periphery and centre, land and town, capital and labour. He then pointed the potential heuristic value to look comparatively for the functioning equivalent in the different cases. The project interrogates the degree of acceptance of armed groups by the state: how does the state deal with violence happening outside of the state's monopoly on public violence and does excessive acceptance of these violent groups lead to a delegitimization of the state? To what extent were these groups integrated into the state monopoly of violence or defended by the state bureaucracy and justice and what were their relationships with the police and the army? Haupt also highlighted the importance of the context of armed groups' creation with a focus on the social fear of the elites. Fear emerges when social boundaries are blurred. Finally, attention to the wider context could show whether these groups were *à contre-courant* or participating in the widespread framework of accepted violence.

### Conference Overview:

#### *Introduction*

Matteo Millan (University of Padova), A false problem? Armed groups and political violence in Fin de Siècle Europe

#### *Section I: United Kingdom and France*

Alessandro Saluppo (University of Padova), A time of remorselessly rising tension, of impending doom: strikebreaking and violence in the Great Unrest, 1910–1914

Arnaud Houte (University of Paris – Panthéon Sorbonne), Political violence and French republican consensus, 1880–1914

Romain Bonnet (University of Padova), Organized violence, strikebreaking and the Jaunes. Institutionalized anti-republicanism in France Belle Époque

#### *Section II: Austria-Hungary and Imperial Germany*

Laurence Cole (University of Salzburg), Militias, militaristic associations and political violence in Austria-Hungary c.1880–1914: Con-

nections or disconnections?

Claire Morelon (University of Padova), Respectable citizens: patriotism, social order, and latent violence in Austrian armed associations

Sven Oliver Müller (University of Tübingen), Communities of Violence? Emotions and assaults at the homefront in Germany, Britain and France in 1914

Amerigo Caruso (University of Padova), De-legating Violence? Strikes and social conflicts in Imperial Germany, 1889–1914

#### *Panel Debate and Final Discussion*

Comparative and transnational perspectives in the study of pre-WWI political violence and armed associations

Chair: Heinz-Gerhard Haupt

Tagungsbericht *Armed Associations and Political Violence in Belle Époque Europe*. 12.12.2017–13.12.2017, Padova, in: H-Soz-Kult 03.02.2018.