

## War, Violence and Technology

**Veranstalter:** German Studies Association network „War and Violence“; Katherine Aaslestad, West Virginia University; Kathrin Maurer, University of Southern Denmark

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The GSA network „War and Violence“ unites scholars concerned with any aspect in the field of war and violence studies. At the forty-third annual conference in 2019, the network supported two panels addressing war, violence and technology, a broad area of research, breaching disciplines and historical eras. It comprised many areas of inquiry: a critical history of war and technology, an understanding of war technology as a cultural representation and mode of perception, and a theoretical discourse of war and technology in relation to individuals and society. The network embraced a wide understanding of technology, which includes the military hardware of warfare as well as the consequences of war technology on the course of conflicts, society, the environment and political power. The panels included representations of war technology in aesthetics – film, literature, and visual art – and its practices across history from the early nineteenth century to the Cold War.

The first panel, *War Technology, Nature, and Landscape*, moderated by Kathrin Maurer and chaired by Stephan Jaeger, addressed different perspectives of the intersection of twentieth and twenty-first century war technology, nature, and landscape. JÖRG ECHTERNKAMP (Potsdam/ Halle) focused on the spatial micro-history of Langeoog, an East Frisian island that became transformed due to the imposition of military hardware during the Third Reich. He outlined the impact of military technology to the natural and social space of the island, beginning with the modernization of rail traffic, the building of an air force base, and an air school prior to the war. The island became a colossal construction site by 1937 with the construction of modern airfields and a for-

tified port. The militarization of the island brought employment and prosperity to its inhabitants. The wartime demographics of the island also changed. To meet the labor demanded for military development in the port and air base, prisoners of war were used as forced laborers. War technology had transformed the island's topography, and there was no re-naturalization of its previous state of nature. Instead, Echternkamp argued, the island's post-war landscape continued to be constructed by social pressures as the historical wartime origins of its earlier transformation faded away.

MEGAN EWING (Ann Arbor) addressed the films of Ferdinand Khittl with an emphasis on technology and destruction. She presented Khittl's 1962 *Die Parallelstraße*, a pioneer film of New German Cinema, as offering insights on the perpetuation of fascism in Europe to American-style capitalism's global proliferation of war-like conditions and effects in the pursuit of power and profit. Khittl's film, therefore, engages the fascist past through an interrogation of new forms of war in the Cold War to present the planet as the battlefield for malevolent forces of environmental destruction, capitalist extraction, and colonial violence.

EMMA CROTT (Sydney) examined the photographic practice of French artist Sophie Ristelhueber (born 1949) directed at the debris and traces of the Gulf War (1990/91). Portrayed as „high-tech,“ „clean,“ and „surgical,“ Crott pointed out that the war, in particular the „precision of aerial attacks,“ redefined how contemporary warfare was waged as well as communicated to the public. Her paper explored Ristelhueber's 1992 series of seventy-one numbered landscape photographs titled *Fait*. These images represent metaphors of wounds and scars of war. She referenced the work of Judith Butler on the vulnerability of human corporeality to link Ristelhueber's work as an exposure of the human body to wartime violence.

STEPHAN JAEGER (Winnipeg) provided the commentary and sought to tie the papers together so that they spoke to each other. In his comments he emphasized the dichotomy of war technology and nature. One the one hand, this relationship can be seen as an-

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tagonistic in that war technology interrupts the state and representation of nature. On the other hand, nature remains present to be unearthed by the photographer or the historian, in a natural-cultural landscape. For Echternkamp he queried whether there is any way for a nature island like Langeoog to embrace the ambiguities of memory between technology and nature in the present instead of hiding and forgetting them. To Ewing, Jaeger noted that Khittl's work presented primarily a metaphor on violence and nature, and wondered if he traced a „real war“ or did war immediately reference his critique of American-style capitalism as the perpetuation of fascism? Finally, Jaeger asked Crott if her interpretation of war and technology was specific to the Gulf War? Or did its technonarrative link into a narrative chain in wars through the 20th and 21st century.

The second panel, *Wars, Technology, and the Aerial*, moderated by Douglas Morris and chaired by Roger Chickering, explored the roles of aerial technology and perceptions as decisive in the configuration of modern warfare. This panel investigated the sphere of the aerial, and how it was shaped by modern weapon technology. KATHRIN MAURER (Odense) presented aerial technology and war in the 19th century featuring war balloons as a technology of seeing and strategy. She argued that war balloons expand the modern narrative of the scopic gaze through another mode of aerial vision – that of flattening. In her analysis of fictional and poetic imaginaries of the nineteenth-century balloon perspective, Maurer's aesthetic discourse highlighted a specific mode of non-scopic vision overlooked in research on air war and technology. The flattened aerial vision of war balloons suggested operative imagery recognizable today from airplanes, satellites, and drones.

SVEA BRAEUNERT (Cincinnati) examined the aerial vision from the perspective of drones and a new ontology of the image. He juxtaposed drone vision with the ideas of the historical advent-garde, in particular the writings by László Moholy-Nagy, Paul Klee, Walter Benjamin, and El Lissitzky in combination with selected works from the Prinzhorn collection that included artwork made in mental hospitals between 1840 and 1945. Braeunert

employed the historical avant-garde as a foil to get a methodological handle on the aesthetics of drone vision by looking at 1920s new vision. Focusing on technology, art and new media, he described the relationship between realism and abstraction as well as the constellation of figure and ground in the view from above.

PETER THOMPSON (Urbana-Champaign) shifted the focus from the aerial vision to the aerial threat in an overview of the *Reichsluftschutzbund* (Reich Civil Defense League or RLB) for national air and gas protection. Established by the Nazi state in 1933, the league launched a broad campaign to teach air-readiness to all Germans. Thompson emphasized that millions of Germans joined this community predicated on modern aerial warfare as the RLB continually sensationalized reminders that enemy planes lay just beyond German borders. In the end, he argued, despite the ongoing mobilization of the RLB, the *Volksgasmaske* represented the regime's shallow efforts in civilian gas protection and served a reminder of its lie to public welfare.

BRIAN CRIM (Lynchburg) turned to matters of power over technology and the perception of rocket scientists during the Cold War. Drawing from recently declassified files from the US Army's Counter Intelligence Corps (CIC), he explored the legacy of German rocket scientists working in the Soviet Union in the immediate post-war years. He traced how the Soviets recruited German scientists, in particular the V-2 specialists, as the Soviet Union sought to exploit Germany's rocket-research for their own expanding military-industrial complex. As the Soviet Union rapidly produced rockets and weapons in the 1950s, the US sought to acquire accurate reporting on Soviet use of foreign experts in missile research to gain information on Soviet scientific and technical achievements.

Beginning with the first two papers, ROGER CHICKERING (Washington) commented that they shared an emphasis on the impact of military technology shaping the ways of seeing things and of broader cultural modes of perception. Images from air balloons and aerial reconnaissance photography flattened topographical images that became operative and they generated a process of eth-

ical flattening as individuals became abstract clusters. Chickering noted that Peter Thompson's papers aligned well with the Germanists' papers on the aerial gaze, though his paper highlighted popular reactions to aerial instruments of warfare and their perceptual consequences. Chickering also emphasized the instrumental character of the state's efforts to unite Germans behind the regime as one vast air-raid community and once equipped with the *Volksgasmaske* Germans could face the skies to withstand aerial warfare.

Though Chickering noted Brian Crim's paper related only tangentially to air war of missiles, it again emphasized the significance of perceptions of the Russian German rocket scientists, who were recruited, enticed, or forced into the Soviet Union after the Second World War. Crim's paper investigated the American military intelligence services that questioned the German scientists for what they could reveal of the Soviet rocket program. Chickering applauded all four papers for their provocation to push us to consider how the technologies of aerial war raise fascinating questions about social, cultural, and political matters. The audience of both well-attended panels generated lively questions and discussions.

The panel series served as an important forum to discuss the intricate relation between war and technology in the field of German Studies. War technologies do not just represent various tools and instruments to conduct warfare, they also obtain a discursive power and steer how we see and interpret war.

The call for papers from the War and Violence network for the forty-fourth German Studies Association conference to be held in Washington, D.C., October 1-4, 2020 will invite contributions that focus on „War, Violence, and Urban Life.“ This theme includes aesthetic representation – film, literature, and visual art – and its practices across history.

#### **Conference overview:**

##### *Panel 1: War Technology, Nature, and Landscape*

Moderator: Kathrin Maurer (University of Southern Denmark, Odense)

Commentator: Stephan Jaeger (University of Manitoba, Winnipeg)

Jörg Echternkamp (Zentrum für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr Potsdam/Martin-Luther-Universität Halle-Wittenberg): Technik vs. Natur? Rüstung und die Rekonstruktion des Raumes im Dritten Reich und in der Nachkriegszeit

Megan Ewing (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor): Documentary, Ecology, Cold War: On the Films of Ferdinand Khittl (1924-1976)

Emma Crott, (University of New South Wales, Sydney): The Wounds of War: Representing the Impact of Military Technology in the Aftermath of the First Gulf War

##### *Panel 2: Wars, Technology, and the Aerial*

Moderator: Douglas Morris (Federal Defenders of New York, New York)

Commentator: Roger Chickering (Georgetown University, Washington)

Kathrin Maurer (University of Southern Denmark, Odense): Aerial Technology and War in the Nineteenth Century

Svea Braeunert (University of Cincinnati): New Visions: Drone Warfare and the Avant-garde

Peter Thompson (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign): Masters or Subjects of the Chemical World? Gas Masks, Personal Armoring, and Vestimentary Complicity in the Third Reich

Brian E. Crim (University of Lynchburg): „The one who is courted by all“: German Rocket Scientists behind the Iron Curtain

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