



Europe's capacity for violence. A narrative

By

Dr. C. Wevelsiep

Priv.-doz. Dr. paed. habil. Dr. phil. habil. Christian Wevelsiep Surkenstr. 160 b 44797 Bochum Tel: 0234/9799772 Fax: 0234/9799772



Abstract

Europes capacity for violence

The capacity for violence is a conceptual bracket for the phenomenon of violence. It must be explored from a historical, cultural, and contemporary perspective. The term used here is certainly ambiguous. In anthropological terms, the capacity for violence could be understood as a person's ability to use violence.

But the capacity for violence does not only apply to individuals but also to collectives and forms of rule. For what does violence mean in a sense other than the tangible? In a qualified order, illegitimate violence is absorbed by the authority of rule and the power of the police; in democracies and liberal orders, people also become accustomed to the practice of renouncing violence through trust.

What does the ability to use power mean in relation to the European self-image and in relation to the problem of violence? This question will be the focus here.

Keywords: war – peace – trust – power – violence – European history

Article History

Received: 05/10/2024

Accepted: 21/10/2024

Published: 24/10/2024

Vol – 1 Issue – 2

PP: -01-11

DOI:10.5281/zenodo.13984880

1. Introduction

One of the characteristics of the modern world is that the horizon of events is global. Events of violence, regardless of their origin and intensity, are therefore always world events and it is hardly possible to treat the political space of a conflict as an internal matter, even if diplomacy sometimes suggests this. The normative conflicts of world society, in which there is no outside and there are manifold interdependencies to consider, are extremely complex for this reason alone.

There is a term from the world of political relations that is rarely used but has immense significance: The capacity for violence. Historical experience teaches us that violence is part of the human condition, it is part of human existence, a question to which the authority of rule provides a possible answer. However, what political philosophy recognizes as a monopoly on the use of force on its high ridge of reflection is a highly complex and contradictory matter. The conflicts of the present day show with all their force how urgent it is to examine the category of the capacity for violence from a social-theoretical perspective. There is no question that normative and epistemological conflicts are linked to this topic. The history of political ideas, for example, speaks of

orders that are created through the interaction of political actors or through a hegemonic constellation. These orders are historically familiar to us, they suggest specific learning processes at a higher level. The present, on the other hand, is perceived as a threatened order, above all because new forms of violence are emerging for which conventional explanations cannot be found. Understandably, this leads to calls for a guarantor of order, political authority, and more.

In a political reading, this call can be equated with simple demands, such as the call for military means, rearmament, strengthening of military power, or even the demand to stand up for a supposedly lost military power. However, these are all familiar patterns from the world of politics. However, it is questionable whether violence in global society has not long since crossed a threshold after which the persuasive power of all conventional narratives diminishes. At the same time, the armed conflicts of the present show that a robust concept of the capacity for violence is indispensable. Violence must not only be answered with the counter-violence of political rhetoric but the authoritative capacity for violence must be presented as a criterion of meaning in its inter-existential dimensions.

The capacity for violence is more than just a conceptual bracket for the monopolization of violence. It must be explored from a historical, cultural, and contemporary perspective. The term used here is certainly ambiguous. In anthropological terms, the capacity for violence could be understood as a person's ability to use violence, whatever their motives. However, the capacity for violence does not only apply to individuals but also to collectives and forms of rule, which complicates matters. For what does violence mean in a sense other than the tangible? In a qualified order, illegitimate violence is absorbed by the authority of rule and the power of the police to provide cover; in democracies and liberal orders, people also become accustomed to the practice of renouncing violence through trust.¹

In German, the category of violence is rather vague. It can refer to a violent interaction, but it also includes the "legal power of disposal and authority of office holders over those subject to violence"². Violence means a political practice, but also a state power of disposal. This violence is interwoven with power and thus means the ability to enforce one's will within a social relationship against the resistance of another.

Insofar as one accepts this, one moves within the well-established space of political order. However, the concept of the capacity for violence encompasses further dimensions, insofar as it goes beyond the concrete exercise of violence in the sense of a specific action. The capacity for violence also describes the awareness of an ability that cannot be equated with knowledge or sovereignty. As is well known, sovereignty means self-determination of a legal entity and thus a certain form of superiority that ideally does not allow any form of external interference.

These legal, state-theoretical, and sociological concepts provide a framework within which social conflicts can be dealt with. However, this is by no means an exhaustive list of the possibilities for dealing with violence. It is well known that violence as a social phenomenon is threatening and challenging for any social order. However, the reactions of a legitimate state order to violence move in an open space of possibilities. In this qualified sense, the capacity for violence should be defined here as the ability to orient oneself in this open space of possibilities according to the criterion of responsibility. The capacity for violence can be divided into concrete and ideal, abstract and practical dimensions. It refers to the exercise of force internally - police cover force, which is based on superior means and appropriate application. Its other side, the external use of force, is far more demanding for obvious reasons.

What does the ability to use force mean in relation to the European self-image? This question will be the focus here. As indicated, the moral category of responsibility should to a certain extent form the epistemological background to all reflections. Only responsibility in the broadest sense can be regarded as an answer to the conflicts of world society;

however, we will only be able to define the category appropriately in the end. The capacity for violence, which can be determined in relation to responsibility, must be understood as a social and inter-existential category. In the world of politics, it is a question of the containment and containment of wars within the horizon of possible peace, i.e. the existential question of how the renunciation of violence can be made possible. The capacity for violence has a dialectical and tense relationship to this category. This also means that a short-sighted conclusion as to how violence can be answered with the help of state counter-violence should be avoided here. It is easy to keep in mind the many figurations of political enmity and to call for a kind of revitalization of nation-state and supra-state violence based on the omnipresent threats. This discussion is, of course, to be had; here, however, it is - once again - a question of defining the capacity for violence in the *longue dureè*. In the simplest terms, the capacity for violence as a political-existential category means something other than the ability to resist, other than the possibilities of the military apparatus. What this "more" can be is to be explored here.

The methodological choices for this by no means modest objective may be unusual, or at least uncomfortable. To begin with, we will focus on a thesis that does not shed a good light on the current state of Western and European culture. The accusation is "decadence". According to this interpretation, Western societies have settled into a world of harmony and complacency that does not produce any willingness to make an effort in the sense of being able to defend themselves. To put it bluntly, the West has lost its capacity for violence. The obvious reaction to this accusation is the aforementioned reflex to demand a new form of the ability to use force - together with the military clout and the political will to make a statement. Not to give in to this reflex and not to repeat the political arguments - this is the best way to describe the aim of the following remarks. It is not an apologia for Western or European culture. Rather, it is an attempt to liberate the category of the capacity for violence from the narrow military and geopolitical channels without denying its fundamental significance. The proof of this is that cultural and historical reflection can express the concept all the more clearly in the mirror of the present. The capacity for violence, as we can provisionally summarize the thesis, is the result of a political-cultural situation in which a specific culture is cultivated "for the sake of freedom" (C. Meier). This culture has a history behind it that binds it and calls it to responsibility. What this call, which is by no means to be understood in the sense of Martin Heidegger, means in the case of Europe will be made explicit at the end.

The following explanations are based on various arguments. Firstly, we need to ask about the consciousness of ability, which made itself felt in a special situation in Greek antiquity. The transfer of this category to modernity is the first challenge - what can a consciousness of ability mean today?

2. Consciousness of ability. From Athens to the present day

¹ Reemtsma 2008

² Reinhart 1999, p. 16

In the world of politics, we encounter another, rarely reflected upon criterion in the question of violence: the consciousness of ability. It is an open concept with many possible connections, which of course takes us far back to the beginnings of Greek culture, or more precisely, to ancient Athens in a particular cultural and political situation.

Let's take a look at the famous cult image of Athena Parthenis, which is only available to us as a replica in the National Museum. Scaled-down Roman copies nevertheless give an impression of the former colossal statue, for which 1000 kg of gold were probably used. The round shield in the left-hand shows the battle between the Athenians and the Amazons, while the inside depicts battles with gods and giants. The statue glorifies war as a heroic event, as was customary for the cultural self-image. However, it also seems to indicate an emerging sense of skill among contemporaries.

What exactly does skill consciousness mean in this context? When we talk about the rise and flourishing of Athens, we generally emphasize the political achievements of self-rule in the polis. But there are various aspects that make up this consciousness - and which give us important clues about the connection between political decision-making and the technical possibilities of a culture.

In the fifth century BC, a political situation arose in ancient Athens that Christian Meier described as a "special moment" in the history of antiquity. It is not entirely clear what this was due to, as the technical achievements were already remarkable in archaic times. What can be demonstrated in the constellation mentioned in the time of Pericles, however, is a kind of sense of self that points to a new political and technical horizon of possibilities. The citizens in the center of the poleis gained a new degree of self-confidence that was based on the power they had gained over their situation. As is well known, the political reforms of democracy and the philosophical affirmation of order contributed to this. The Persian Wars had established Athens as a new superpower. The Greek victories at Salamis, Plataiai, and Mycale were eagerly sung about; the propagandistic effects have been sufficiently documented. This political world gave Athenian self-confidence an open stage. One could marvel at the decline of the great powers, the long and tenacious struggle of the Greeks against the Persians, and the struggle for hegemony in the Aegean. Now, however, after a brief phase of stabilization, the Athenian consciousness was given an outlet, a resonance chamber in which an awareness of its own possibilities could unfold.

This space of consciousness and possibility was filled with political concepts, of *equality, justice, civility, and pride*. They had an immediate effect without claiming the temporal anticipation that is characteristic of the modern political sense of the world. But beyond the directly political, it was the field of technology in which this awareness of ability could unfold. Advances in technology were certainly noticed by the Sophists and incorporated into a critical reflection³.

³ Meier 1993

For the Greeks, according to Christian Meier, the world remained the same, which was expressed in reference to the existing order; no thought of revolutionary activities, no thought of the possible abolition of slavery. The political form was to be preserved, while at the same time, the achievements of technology indicated that changes in people's lives were inevitable. "Whatever they found that was new, and that was no small thing, even in technology, in seafaring, in the economy - it remained individual discoveries, individual improvements, the highest thing that could be derived from them was the awareness of far-reaching human possibilities."⁴

What exactly these possibilities consisted of, what spaces of thought, not just brute force, they opened up, is the significant aspect of this awareness. In Athens, an inkling emerged that contained a vague equivalent of the modern idea of progress. Not the awareness of a long process in which one culture proves to be representative of the whole. This perception remained, as far as we can tell, in the traditional world reference, which as yet knew nothing of human rhetoric, made no anticipation of better times in its name. It was "merely" the awareness of the reality of working, realizing, finding, and inventing that made up this historically new space: "It was found that the *téchnai* as a whole, the abilities to professionally and methodically solve a wide variety of problems were greatly advanced. Artists believed they had reached the utmost possibilities of their art. Physicians were in the process of inventing a new science. (...) Thinkers set about designing entire social orders on the drawing board. Sophists claimed to be able to put their students in a position to achieve anything they wanted in business and politics."⁵

The transfer from ancient times to the present is difficult for several reasons. The possibilities of linking the specific skills of a cultural heyday with the "skills" of modernity seem extremely limited. In our opinion, the point of application lies in the perception of the given technical and political possibilities of an age - but also in the shock of the abundance of power associated with it.

In terms of the diagnosis of time in this context, we could speak of ruptures in time and different speeds that characterize the signatures of modern times and thus mark the most important difference to the past. If we ask Reinhart Koselleck about the state of the modern, bourgeois world, the first terms that come to mind are crisis and acceleration. The *Sattelzeit* was followed by the upheaval into new time conditions, for which we have various forms of expression; loss of order (Hans Blumenberg) or new confusion (J. Habermas) and much more. The temporalization of experience at the moment of crisis was decisive for Koselleck's theory of temporal layers. To put it bluntly, we perceive the presence of crises under the condition of coagulated time⁶.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 472

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 470

⁶ Hoffmann 2023

The acceleration of history means that experiences and horizons of expectation are moving closer together than ever before; we are currently living in a technically conditioned space of action of modernity. "Even our generation living today," says Koselleck, "witness to the moon trip and Sputnik, direct television transmission, rockets and jet airplanes, has not suffered the same surge of experience as the generation of the Vormärz." ⁷ In other words: we are, consciously or pre-consciously, children of an experience of acceleration that has been going on since the upheaval of modernity at the latest and is constantly creating new spurts of experience, but also various divisions. The experience of modern time consciousness includes a specific hiatus in several senses. A rift in social terms, between generations and cultures, but also a rift in terms of technical power of disposal. When we look at the elementary conditions of contemporary violence, the first thing that strikes us is the abundance of technological capability that we are dealing with. The destructive potential of military equipment challenges philosophical and ethical thinking.

In this respect, the question of how we currently want to define the capacity for violence makes sense with recourse to history. There is no question that we are morally challenged in many ways. But first of all, the modern awareness of violence, which arises from the technical possibilities within the horizon of being able, willing, or able to, is probably at issue.

A lithograph from 1980 puts this question into an interesting contemporary historical perspective. The "frightened European" by Rudolf Hausner shows the face of a man against the apocalyptic backdrop of a nuclear explosion. The burning of the mushroom cloud, the contrasting colors of the horizon, and the man's drawn face do not fail to have an effect. The lithograph was a suggested image for the cover of an anthology that depicted some of the prominent discourses of the 1980s: "Tactical Nuclear Weapons - Fragmented Deterrence"⁸. It was a publication that arose from an interdisciplinary conference in Bielefeld between the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Reinhart Koselleck had organized the conference, which focused on the arms race between NATO and the Warsaw Pact at the time. Here too, as in many of his ingenious writings, Koselleck's gaze is aimed at the anthropological determinations of finitude, which here lead to a confrontation with aporia.

It is the *change in experience in relations of violence* that describes the context here. It could be speculated that we find ourselves in a special historical situation: wars that lie a generation behind us are wars that have been understood. The experiences of violence are worth remembering, they form the foundation of memoria. But what about the new experiences that each generation has for itself and which are not simply a continuation of the old ones? Koselleck's historiography gives us the opportunity to overcome these challenges. It helps us to

cope with the adversities, but also with the paradoxes of the confrontation with violence.

A change in experience penetrates the consciousness when there are no ready-made patterns and, above all, no common language available for something new. This applies in particular to the outbreak of a war that cannot be attributed to the past (the "old wars"). From a European perspective, the wars in the Balkans in the former Yugoslavia in the mid-1990s were such an initial rupture in experience, because a war had now been approaching Europe's internal borders for some time. Unpleasant realities already had to be faced here, because war itself became an issue again⁹. The Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022 understandably reinforced this surprising motive.

What exactly is to be understood by these wars (which form only a narrow section of the panorama of contemporary wars between the 20th and 21st centuries) as a change in experience?

War is one of those phenomena that can form thresholds of experience for a generation. Experiences of violence, which are in themselves singular, unjustifiable, and unique, create a shared history¹⁰. A space of experience is formed which - as we have known since Koselleck's reflections on the Sattelzeit - can distance itself from a horizon of expectations. Expectations and experiences diverge - and in times of war, this connection is intensified in various ways. For some, violence breaks into their world so that its livability is lost and an otherness enters their lives. For others, this violence cannot be compared with any previous experience; it remains abstract and distant. It remains an alien experience that can only be integrated into a shared horizon of experience to a very limited extent.

As this is also contemporary history, we are in the realm of speculation. The change in experience that occurs with each new war in a shared experiential space does not fit into a coherent whole. In some circumstances, this can be said of the past: we speak of war generations whose time periods were filled with experiences of suffering. These stories of war, in front of or behind a front, on this side, and on the other side of the spaces of violence, can be integrated into a common set of experiences. As little as these individual biographical episodes are transferable, as small as the yield of a summation of experiences of suffering may be, this older idea of a space of experience remains coherent.

While it was still possible to assume a narrative history there, these possibilities seem to be narrowing in our present. The change in experience - in a different sense to that intended by Koselleck's historiography - takes place through long-term trends, gradual changes, transformations, and the creation of new concepts, and at the same time through eruptions of violent events. It is difficult to put it into a context; instead, we are dealing with loose threads that cannot be bundled together.

⁷ Koselleck 2000, p. 153

⁸ Blanchard 1987, therein: Koselleck, Introduction, pp. 13-18; on this also: Hoffmann 2023, pp. 332 ff.

⁹ Hondrich 2002

¹⁰ Koselleck 2000, pp. 27-77

Here are a few examples: *the nation-state is seen as obsolete, but its presence is demanded when an emergency arises; the monopoly on the use of force comes into effect at various levels and is not always "attributable" due to technological advances. Total media presence means that information about the war is available at all times, but without offering any orientation.*

The question that goes beyond this, however, is: at what point in history do "we" stand? At a point where, in the sense of post-historical irony, nothing more can be hoped for and nothing more can be said; at a point without clear findings and without ties? Or at a point where we can still perceive a long-term change in the relations of violence in order to translate this into reflections between hermeneutics and historiography? In the latter case, which we will assume here, the task remains to work against the supposed loss of political subjectivity.

Sharpening the categories of political creative power against the logic of imperial striving for power would be a characteristic of such political subjectivity. The capacity for violence in the better sense is to be linked to the criterion of political subjectivity. What does this look like in the case of European identity?

3. On the question of European political subjectivity

"No will to power". This was the title of an issue of Merkur, the "Zeitschrift für europäisches Denken", which dealt with the topic of decadence¹¹. However, the accusation was aimed at observing a cultural and political decline. The publication put its finger on a wound, or perhaps better, on a dark spot in social discourse. Against the backdrop of current war events (since 2022/23) and, above all, against the backdrop of a return of geopolitics to Europe, the statements to be read there are highly significant.

The criterion of decadence, as applied to the affluent societies of the West, is ambiguous and highly ambivalent. Decadence can occur in more harmless forms, but it can also affect the social body as a whole. It then threatens the sovereignty that some like to associate with national self-assertion, the ability to use force, and the willingness to defend oneself. Decadence as a military form of loss of sovereignty was therefore already an issue years ago; at present (and presumably in the long term) it will probably be discussed more sharply and relentlessly. In political terms, this insight is by no means new or surprising. Since the middle of the 20th century, Western societies have been working towards an ideal of non-violence, or rather, they have been creating orders in which classic military conflict is avoided¹². Post-heroic societies avoid war for good reasons; they agree with Kant that war is associated with unbearable costs; moreover, they shy away from sacrifice.

¹¹ Bohrer 2007, p. 659-668

¹² Brock 2006, pp. 203-233

In the *longue durée*, or with the foresight of historians, however, the criterion of military decadence must be examined more closely. "Carthage", according to Karl Heinz Bohrer, "ultimately fell because its citizens were not prepared for self-defense but, unlike Rome, depended on mercenary armies."¹³

This corresponds to a very generalized "our" view of Hellenic culture. This culture had matured into a flourishing embodiment of the republican ethos because its citizens had acquired a minimum level of awareness of their capabilities, politically, socially, and also militarily¹⁴.

The contrast with the present is all the greater: assuming that the will to military self-assertion is a characteristic of national strength, objective military decadence becomes problematic. According to Bohrer, the country is neither ready nor able to defend itself in an emergency, in line with other voices¹⁵.

Since the violent invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the term "*Wendezeit*" has been popularly used. It illustrates the dramatic nature of the events and proves right those voices that accuse core Europe and Germany in particular of a blatant lack of awareness of power. The time of change called for a new understanding of sovereignty, a readiness to defend itself, and military strength. Gone are the days when power, especially power in nation-state categories, was discredited.

However, the problem that is to be examined more closely from this point of view can only be recognized in a roundabout way. Is geopolitics returning to Europe, is it unintentionally or intentionally leading to a renaissance of the military? It is these sentences that show how presuppositional writing about war and the geopolitics of our time is. The aim of the following reflection is correspondingly ambitious: it is a matter of an in-depth understanding of the political terms used to describe geopolitical realities. This normative definition is not confrontational, it does not play off heroic against post-heroic motives, it does not criticize "pacifism" or the supposed "decadence", but rather uses history to search for the underlying motives behind the violent consciousness of our time.

Three closely interrelated problems are to be pursued:

- The ostensible motive can initially be formulated as a suspicion: it seems that in times of heightened unrest and anxiety, the desire for firm, unbreakable narratives becomes all the stronger. Such narratives are condensed in strong contrasts, for example in the difference between the "old" and the "new" Europe. As we shall see, however, these narratives are too compact, too closed, and dense, so to speak, to capture the reality of contemporary war.

¹³ Bohrer 2007, p. 661

¹⁴ Meier 2009

¹⁵ Münkler 2007, p. 659 ff.

- The category of political subjectivity must be defined in this context. Today, it is not only the traditional concepts of the national that are in question but also those of political subjectivity. Of course, this also concerns the darker area of the capacity for violence. The accusation against the West weighs heavily: a sluggish society driven by self-doubt loses its pride, its sense of power, and thus also its ability to assert itself as a nation. But here, too, we need to take a closer look and ask what could still be considered a "willingness to defend" under the given conditions of the modern state.
- Finally, we must ask under what conditions history can be written today, especially that history which is permeated by violent eruptions, warlike "relapses" and geopolitical calculations. The question of the possibility of writing history is linked to the aforementioned question of Europe's political subjectivity.

4. The old and the new Europe

"The myth as handed down to us by the Greeks, the legend of the foundation of our territorial identity, is not only about an act of violence but also about a historically unique maturing process, about generosity, self-determination, and tolerance. In a way, Zeus compensated for the damage he caused through his insatiable sexual greed, thus providing the model for the typical European dynamic that the philosopher Hegel later made palatable to the believers in history under the advertising formula of the world spirit. Admittedly, it remains a strange idea to name an entire continent after a naked woman. It says a lot about the subject of the story - as a rule, it is male. Only the fact that, following Zeus, she was regarded as a sexual object explains the violence that the struggle for her possession unleashed in her suitors. What is conquered is what is considered fertile and promises pleasure, and the minstrel song precedes the conquest of land. The fact that Europe could, conversely, take its fate into its own hands was a punch line that only later times would come up with."¹⁶

The question of Europe is notoriously complex. Where the boundaries of the European community are drawn, where inclusion is invoked and exclusion is practiced, where the practical and political significance of European identity ultimately lies - all of this is the subject of intense debate. A historical perspective may be helpful in this context: history contains a variety of images of Europe and a multitude of possible answers to the question of what the Europe of today may look like in comparison to the Europe of old.

Ancient Europe, however, is a misleading term when you consider that the name Europe did not actually come into use until the early modern period. It was not a central concept in antiquity. Myth alone provided the first clues: as is well known, the Phoenician king's daughter was abducted by Zeus in the form of a bull; this led to the founding of the Minoan

dynasty of rulers. The founding myth paints a violent, equally sensual picture that shows us how different the common images of Europe can be.

What was the old Europe and what is the new Europe supposed to be? The difference becomes clearer when we look at very roughly cut images of Europe from the picture gallery of history. We gain an initial insight into what Europe was when we ask about the mode of communization. It was not a *European* community, but the *unity of Christianity* that formed the core of the European Middle Ages. The different peoples of Europe came together in "*christianitas*", which formed the anchor and center of a world whose borders were always drawn between Christians and pagans. The Catholic West came into confrontation with the Byzantine East; Charlemagne, crowned emperor by the Roman Pope around 800, was occasionally referred to as the father of Europe. He ruled over a Europe without England and Scandinavia, which had its borders in the east of Byzantium.

More interesting, however, seems to be the question as to which factors were responsible for the emergence of European ties and European consciousness at that time. The first thing to think of here is probably the violence that gave rise to a vague "sense of connection"¹⁷. The first thing to mention here is, of course, the crusade experience, which was based on various motives. They went to Jerusalem in multiple frontal positions, fought against Muslims, against Jews, and in part against the Eastern Roman Empire. In the Latin western part of Christendom, the crusades had led to an internal European context. Centuries later, this outward violence was matched by a well-founded internal fear, triggered by the confrontation with the Ottoman Empire, which had taken Constantinople in 1453. The Ottoman troops under Sultan Süleyman had previously reached the gates of Vienna. Until the 18th century, this was referred to as the "fear of the Turks".

No matter how one categorizes these very different experiences of violence, and no matter how great the sense of cohesion that emerged, the genuinely European identity only emerged later: in the 18th century, when the monopoly of the church eroded and ties to religion weakened. A cultural space now unfolded that was filled with so many contradictory motives and soon grew beyond geographical borders. The cultural blossoming of Europe - driven by economic power, political empowerment, and, above all, a particular capacity for violence - can be understood as a self-contained history. This Europe conquered geographical, intellectual, and political spaces and developed a corresponding self-confidence.

It is only a small step from self-confidence to arrogance. Ranke spoke of the "genius of the Occident", whose spirit "transforms the peoples into orderly armies", who "covers all the seas with fleets and turns them into his own property."¹⁸ However, these were new tones of a European sense of superiority that was by no means prevalent in medieval

¹⁶ D. Grünbein in Renger 2003, p. 220

¹⁷ Kocka, 2004, p. 121

¹⁸ Ranke 1879, p. 518, quoted from Kocka 2004, p. 129

Europe. At that time, Europe was considered an inferior part of the world compared to Jerusalem. For the medieval "christianitas", Jerusalem was the center of the world. It was not until the Baroque and Enlightenment periods that talk of Europe turned into the opposite.

We can follow on from a thought here that takes us back to the present of Europe and its challenges. As we have seen, Europe can be depicted in various psychological and cultural facets. But it only became a space *held together* by a *will in the* early modern period. This is where the history of nation-states provides us with clues to the contradictions of the present. Sovereign territorial states emerged from the age of religious wars, offering a political response to the divisions and discord sparked by the furor of religion. Doubts about the world-embracing effect of Christianity grew; the sovereign territorial states established themselves as the new masters of the world. They took the lead by creating order at home and spreading violence to the outside world.

Here we encounter an image of Europe that combines all the characteristics of arrogance. In the *Universal-Lexicon* published by Johann Heinrich Zedler - the definitive work, printed in Halle and Leipzig between 1731 and 1754 - there is the following entry on "Europe":

"Although Europe is the smallest of all four parts of the world, it is nevertheless preferable to all the others for various reasons. The air is more temperate there, and the landscapes are very fertile. (...) It has an abundance of all necessary foodstuffs. The inhabitants are of very good manners, polite and sensible in knowledge and crafts."¹⁹

To paraphrase Nietzsche, this shows the will to be something, to present and represent something. In other words, the inhabitants of the continent had acquired their excellence through skill and bravery. The cultural, political, scientific, and military superiority is, in a word, deserved. "Europe is where the most civilized and powerful people live," concludes Dag Nikolaus Hasse with the necessary ironic distance.²⁰

In contrast, what does a different, a new Europe look like? Various aspects point to a future that one might imagine as a bright, open, even benevolent culture. The heavy historical ballast, for which the accusation of Eurocentrism can only halfway arise, is thrown off. At least when talking about Europe takes on a different form; it should not so much narrow the view as open it. An open image of Europe manages without colonial superiority, without resentment; it disarms - in word and deed. Especially when it opens up to the other and endeavors to "make voices audible that have spoken about Europe in a different mode."²¹

Disarmament undoubtedly also includes the psychology that allows for the negative. Hopes for democracy and the rule of law are one part; talking and writing about the horrors of culture are the other necessary part. A new Europe: this title

hints at the difficulties one has to contend with in the context of the history of violence. What is new, different, and highly valued about contemporary Europe? The competence to deal with one's own history directs one's gaze in an interesting direction. In general terms, the question should be asked as to the purposes for which historical awareness should be promoted; in a special sense, a European historical awareness can also be established. The past, as Jörn Rüsen writes, is never completely past, but always present. Historical thinking bends the "transcendence of human life beyond its preconditions, conditions, and circumstances back to the past"²². History becomes meaningful, it requires and enables orientation. People are known to be capable of action and suffering as well as in need of meaning; in all their actions and thoughts, they seek a "surplus of value and purpose"²³. They have to deal with the gravity and harshness of their own experiences just as much as they have to cast the past in a specific light, sometimes embellishing, illuminating, or distorting it.

These very general insights become clearer when we pose the question of a specifically *European* historical consciousness. What would such a consciousness consist of, one that disregards both the diversity of historical cultures and political pitfalls? It is by no means a question of conjuring up a unity in which all particularities are swallowed up. Just as a common history cannot be decreed and just as a unifying consciousness cannot be "created", there is only one conceivable way out. We can open a gap, perhaps no more, to the realm of a European historical consciousness when the negative, painful, and repressed comes to the surface. The reassurance of our own greatness, the remembrance of origins and founding moments is replaced by a form of remembrance that can certainly be described as humility.

Humility instead of arrogance. Those who claim this for themselves are by no means protected from error. What makes this process so significant, on the other hand, is the willingness to turn to those features of oneself that one arbitrarily shies away from, that form a sting in the consciousness. According to Rüsen, "remembering experiences of horror" in the context of one's own history "breaks off the ethnocentric tip of self-confidence".²⁴

What can only be hinted at here is of greater significance with regard to the question of what Europe *can and wants to be*. Such a new Europe no longer sees itself in the brightest light - because it assures itself of its excellence compared to other continents - but in an obscure gray. Such a Europe cannot be imagined as a new "Elysium", as a place that stands out as the last refuge against the restlessness of the world. It is first and foremost a place of inner diversity and conscious restraint. European historical consciousness is now characterized by opposing forces of memory. Whereas in earlier epochs the sharp contrast in which the brightest European self was held against the darkness, today it is the negative moments of

¹⁹ Zedler 1732, quoted after Hasse 2021, p. 20 f.

²⁰ Hasse 2021, p. 21

²¹ *Ibid*, p. 8

²² Rüsen 2003, p. 34

²³ p. 33 f.

²⁴ *Ibid*, p. 99

experience that systematically break the self-image. What from a distance is perhaps associated with weakness is here transformed into an advantage. For it is important to draw the motives for the production of cultural meaning from the negative insights into history, by no means referring to the German way alone. It is the communicative structure in which an unconditional advantage over Europe's past is inherent: for a space of thought has emerged in which violent pasts and historical legacies can be reflected upon; a space, moreover, in which different cultural centers come into contact with one another.

Up to this point, the unbiased observer will probably agree and welcome such a new Europe - if it corresponds to the real situation to some extent. The difficulties begin, however, when we subject this new self-image of Europe to questioning: because it is obviously not enough to refer to mutual recognition. The power of dialog is to be appreciated and it may also be associated with the capacity for peace, but the decisive question arises in relation to the category of sovereignty.

5. Sovereignty in the twilight

One of the most momentous sentences from Carl Schmitt's work can be found in the passage that he who decides on the state of emergency is sovereign. It is one of those beliefs that invites unthinking repetition. In relation to the challenges posed by contemporary wars, the sentence can be interpreted in many ways. The question is - going far beyond Schmitt's insinuations - what the idea of sovereignty means in the European context and what criteria could be used - political-administrative, legal or socio-political criteria, for example.

At the heart of the discussion about sovereignty were questions about Europe's *political borders*: a confederation of states that wants to be more than a temporary alliance must have clearly defined borders. In order to form an identity, so the general argument goes, but also to gain the ability to act. This ability to act is politically significant and a prerequisite. So what about this ability to act in the event of war, which did not just begin with the Russian invasion, but has basically always been an unwelcome guest in international relations? This question forces us to come to an understanding about our relationship to war in general. And in the course of this, the accusation must be examined as to how we want to define sovereignty in an emergency.

What constitutes sovereignty? The above-mentioned narrative about forms of decadence must now be examined more closely. The accusation was aimed at a disposition in general. In the West, people were not prepared to pay the price, so to speak, that was demanded for the defense of territorial sovereignty. Sovereignty in this case would also mean the will to national self-assertion, a commitment to the ability to use force, and the willingness to defend oneself. Only real war would bring this awareness to the fore.

Different narratives come together here, which must be clearly distinguished. These are narratives from the past that can only be translated into the present under certain

conditions. What was the nation state and what can it still be in today's supranational spaces? As is well known, the nation state of classical coinage emerged in a particular epoch. It grew on solid ground: with the help of the principle of rigid borders and territorial localization. Sovereignty accrued to this state to the extent that it fulfilled executive functions and ensured order within the state. This state, which in its authority and power drew the fragile line to the totalitarian state, needed the direct connection to land and soil for its legitimacy.

The difficulty is obvious: this state had its time and its zenith, but it can no longer be equated with today's democratic state. Contemporary complaints about the end of the nation-state, however, tend towards an unpleasant confusion of different state models. The democratic nation-state is said to be exhausted, obsolete as it were, because it is being pushed beyond its original boundaries. The de facto dissolution of political boundaries therefore leads to devastating consequences for the existence of democracy. This is, of course, equated with a place of shared history where participants meet on an equal footing. The loss of this place weighs heavily: it is equated with the decline of democracy²⁵.

All that can be hoped for from theoretical reflection at this point is clarity about the underlying conditions in the *conditio politica*. Talk of the loss of democracy is tainted by nostalgia; the same applies to the accusation of decadence: an exhausted democracy, whose members are paralyzed by crises, loses its resilience. It would therefore no longer be prepared to seriously defend its values. This narrative is self-contained and forces us to take a glorified view of a world with a common past and shared interests in the common good.

In contrast, how is political sovereignty to be understood today? We now return to the original question of the "new" Europe. As we have shown, a historical consciousness that resembles a relentless self-questioning is decisive for its identity. In addition, however, the constitutional dimension must also be taken into account. This should also be kept away from a substantialist interpretation. Modern democratic states do not have their "ground" on which they stand; they are misunderstood as property or "possessions". The misunderstanding that underlies talk of the decline of the nation-state has much to do with the regime of thought that argues in categories of possession, groundedness, and cultural homogeneity. Contemporary democratic theory recognizes in this the "continuation of the medieval connection between land and rule"²⁶. Certainly, the pre-modern, absolutist state wanted to preserve and enlarge its territory, shift borders and increase its omnipotence. Of course, the modern democratic state is far removed from this because it replaces the territorial principle with the principle of the association of persons. Such a state is to be understood as a community of people who impose democratic laws on each other. The "fictitious contract

²⁵ Guéhenno 1996

²⁶ Mouse 2011, p. 378

between free and equal" ²⁷ is its binding principle, not territoriality, descent or tradition.

These propositions are self-evident for the theory of democracy. However, democratic states find themselves on difficult terrain when they are confronted with the phenomenon of war, with a violence for which they have not actually developed a language or "sense". *War as a serious matter* is far removed from democratic reason. As a topic on which its members communicate in open discourse in order to ultimately emerge with the power of the better argument, it is difficult to digest. There are various reasons for this: Democratic rights are known to be defensive rights; the democratic state is based on the willingness to agree on minimum consensus under constitutional law. Democracy is, if we consult political philosophy, correctly understood as joint action; thus always in a space beyond violence (H. Arendt). Even if language itself is contaminated by violence, the belief in violent understanding is decisive.

The impasse in which democracy unintentionally finds itself here must be considered in conjunction with the achievements outlined above. Achievement means: we live in a culture with a developed historical consciousness that has sensitized us to all conceivable forms of violence. We also live in a democratic space that, since its detachment from the soil, has established itself as a permanent new beginning and is characterized by fair procedures. This narrative has by no means come to an end or even become obsolete. It is an immense challenge for the rewriting and rewriting of history. In the end, an attempt will be made to think of war as a serious case together with the previous criteria of political subjectivity. Can we justify Europe's capacity for violence as a new narrative?

What form of narrative would be appropriate to put into words the difficult concept of the capacity for violence in the context of European culture? In general, mankind is dependent on good narratives. Narratives, which we encounter in science and everyday life, religion and myth, in political and social contexts, fulfill specific functions. They form and shape reality and are therefore of great value.

Here we first follow the thesis that historical narratives as a special type fulfill this function in a special way. Seen as a whole, they enable the formation of a qualified order. This claim must be defended below, as it is a challenge for contemporary discourse. It is incumbent on postmodern thinking to question grand narratives, to expose them as shadow plays of instrumental reason. Here we are thinking in a completely different direction: narratives do not corrupt the subject, but allow it to unfold. They are not tools of invisible powers, but legitimate forms of expression with which conditions of identity and meaning are created.

The question of how we can explain the emergence of the modern age has been asked so often; but what does it mean to seek orientation in the modern age through narratives? It does indeed require a grand narrative, albeit in such a way that it

incorporates resistance and the possibility of division into the narrative form.

It makes sense to present the aspects mentioned in question form. When dealing with violence, there is always a negative finding at the beginning, which can be interpreted as a task, a puzzle, a challenge, and also as a point of orientation. *Ties can break, violence crosses borders, narratives lead to delusions*. These are striking sentences that should not stand alone in this form. To a certain extent, they sum up the dilemma of modernity in everyday life: rule proves to be fragile, and democratic self-rule in particular proves to be a threatened form of order. War, on the other hand, appears to the viewer as a phenomenon of eternal recurrence, ineradicable, and with ever new forms, it remains the evil of humanity. And last but not least, narratives prove to be deeply ambivalent: when they become instruments in the hands of the powerful and, in the worst case, end in political existentialism.

But to the same extent that we recognize a hard causality here - in the intertwining of the political and the apolitical, war as a way of life, manipulation, and blindness - we can also recognize the outlines of a positive creative power. What the ethos of the political, good ties, and meaningful rule mean is recognizable in every case. At best, the historical analyses can be brought into a coherent context with the normative and philosophical determinations. *World culture in the making* would then, it is to be hoped, not remain a hollow figure of thought, but a serious challenge for thought.

6. Europe and world culture: a new narrative

One last historical review: At the beginning of the last century, a coming world conflagration had announced itself and sent an entire continent into turmoil (P. Blom). European intellectuals resisted the tendency towards war euphoria, which was more illusion than reality. Sigmund Freud spoke of coming atrocities that the state wanted to justify to the individual; Albert Einstein and Georg Friedrich Nicolai, along with other authors, wrote a manifesto to Europe, a manifesto against the culture of violence. These voices were by no means isolated. The top echelons of power spoke of a mood of euphoria, of a frenzy in which all differences would dissolve; but feelings of skepticism and fear were also widespread and those with enough sense saw the last days of the continent dawning. Political initiatives were supposed to halt the course of events, but neither social democratic peace rallies, nor the peace societies, nor the commitment of British committees and fellowships could prevent the war²⁸.

In the midst of social unrest, Georg Friedrich Nicolai wrote his appeal to Europeans. This war, he wrote, was a source of future wars and therefore a doom from which humanity could only escape if it became aware of the biology of war²⁹. Nicolai wrote his rebuttal in the shadow of the previously published *Manifesto of the 93rd*, in which the representatives

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 381

²⁸ *Ferguson: 2013*, p. 216

²⁹ *Nicolai 1983*

of German science had defended themselves against a distorted image of the German using their own stylistic means of indignation: German militarism was to be defended because it served German culture and was to be understood as protection against cultural imperialism.

Not so Nicolai: his thinking was directed towards a Europe that had already grown together through science and technology and was characterized by numerous connections. A war between brothers could only produce defeats, while the outlines of a world culture were already evident in the history of the continent. At the heart of this world culture was a European alliance that would preserve peace, an alliance of the benevolent and educated. The call for signatures met with little interest; Albert Einstein, Otto Buek, and Wilhelm Förster signed the document, but there were also numerous refusals.

From the past to the present. We are forced to distance ourselves from the question of where we stand in history³⁰, and therefore who can still write history at all. There is at least agreement that colonial forms of thought must be overcome; we have long since left the horizon of the general and must radically "de-romanticize" ourselves³¹. What remains unclear is who could ensure a better future, who takes responsibility in times of crisis, and what a policy could consist of that is often projected onto a planetary scale. The contradiction could not be more extreme: everything that corresponds to the criticized image of hegemony is literally deconstructed; at the same time, everything must be demanded, global, comprehensive initiatives are called for in order to preserve a future that is conducive to life. Asking where *we stand in history* therefore also means taking stock of the power of the state to shape international politics, the relationship between human rights and the rights of nature. Grand narratives are certainly suitable for these great questions of humanity if one concedes that "greatness" is always relative in the eye of the beholder.

So if we ask about the outlines of a culture that is perhaps already in the process of becoming, then we must ask in the same breath about the nature of war, which has a firm grip on our time as it has on all previous times. War is known to be a harsh taskmaster, a demon with a long shadow. However, the nature of war is not as clear-cut as the images of contemporary history would have us believe. *

On the cover of one of the last publications on the European war of modernity, a stern teacher crouches on a place of skulls; as Satan, however, he seems to be badly shot. His image appears rather pathetic and exhausted; the many dead obviously take their toll, or at least a justification. All the eagerly proclaimed purposes - war is a laboratory of modernity, a companion and preparer of the state, it is the motor and center of the nation-state, revolution, and colonialism - they cannot conceal the fact that neither purposes nor the moral verdict can change anything about the

eternal struggle. War, does it remain the father of all things, as Heraclitus, the dark thinker, once saw it?

The key to an alternative perspective lies in the linguistic treatment of the phenomenon of war. Wars can be ignited, justified, or even brought about in drowsy impotence (C. Clark); however, war as a socio-philosophical topos must be thought of differently. If we think of war as a multi-layered, ambiguous phenomenon, we come close to the assertion that it is, by and large, an ontological disaster. War is part of the social world, it permeates our ideas, our lives. War is the measure of being - no less a personage than Emanuel Levinas saw himself called upon to make this quite misleading statement, even though his thinking and writing were dedicated to the memory of the Other. Levinas' speech, for example in "Totality and Infinity"³², was dedicated to the enigma of violence without explicitly providing information about the empirical forms of such violence.

Thus, from a socio-philosophical perspective, much that deserves the title of war initially remains in the dark. In an intensification that probably belongs more to the world of Thomas Hobbes, war becomes a doom in existence, a metaphysical struggle, as it were, with the demanding God of war. The existence of the Other, with whom we are always already in a relationship of guilt, is seen as a challenge to man; but man's position in existence is also seen as a challenge to the extreme. This is surrounded by a violence that makes itself felt as a concrete historical experience and is characterized by world war, genocide, and totalitarian violence. With a phrase that seems astonishingly simple, such historical experience becomes a *polemical* statement: war is a representative cipher for something incomparably greater; war becomes a challenge to "any morality that must henceforth promise to oppose it absolutely, without glossing over in the slightest how much we are exposed to violence."³³

From now on, two types of writing against war can be distinguished. The first type is the familiar and popular one: someone turns against war, against the unwritten imperative to wage war. It is writing and thinking against the prevailing war that seems like a necessary but futile action and it strikes a "nerve" because the societies addressed have usually been in a state that is heading straight towards war for a long time.

But another motive is emerging that is incomparably more difficult and at the same time more misleading: *Being at war*. A judgment and a signpost that knocks any illusions about morality and resistance out of our hands. Being, which is always already *at war*, is a challenge for thinking. War does not appear as an outstanding, all-questioning event of manageable duration, but as a general condition, a basic human situation. If we start from this difficult-to-bear thesis, the coordinates of our relationship to the world change.

It must be emphasized at this point that there is no change in the resistance to violence from a normative point of view. Violence should not be, it is the other of reason; another that

³⁰ Agamben 2021

³¹ Hasse 2021; Vf. 2022

³² Levinas 1987

³³ Liebsch 2018, Volume II, p. 985

we have good reason to avoid and that we want to keep out of our lives as far as possible. But the question of how we can avoid violence or at least come close to less violence is of secondary importance. It is thwarted by a lack of understanding of what counts as violence in the first place. When Levinas and other philosophers strictly claim that we are addicted to war, they mean something other than a tendency towards bellicosity, other than a reference to the concealed economy of war. War permeates existence as a whole and thus offers no possibility of escape. Even language, another popular gateway to being, is not ultimately free of violence in relation to violence.

The task we must set ourselves is to confront war, to fathom its nature, and to describe the forms in which it occurs. At the end of such "war narratives", of course, peace does not appear as a more or less convincing counter-narrative or even as a temporary end to history. Rather, the war, as it is described here, leads to the shape of a world culture with Europe, however unfinished and provisional it may appear at this stage.

Summary

This article focuses on the concept of the ability to use force. In general, the term is reduced to the political-military context; for example, to military means, armament, strengthening of military power, or military strength. In contrast, it must be shown that the ability to use force is more than just a conceptual bracket for the monopolization of force. It must be explored from a historical, cultural, and contemporary perspective. However, the concept of the capacity for violence encompasses further dimensions, insofar as it goes beyond the concrete exercise of violence in the sense of a specific act. The capacity for violence also describes the awareness of an ability that cannot be equated with violence or sovereignty.

What does the capacity for violence mean in relation to the European self-image? The proof here is that cultural and historical reflection can express the concept all the more clearly in the mirror of the present. The capacity for violence is the result of a political-cultural situation in which a specific culture is cultivated "for the sake of freedom" (C. Meier). This culture has a history behind it that binds it and calls it to responsibility. What this call means in the case of Europe will be made explicit in the presentation.

Literature

1. Agamben, G.: An welchem Punkt stehen wir? Die Epidemie als Politik. Wien/Berlin: Turia und Kant 2021
2. Blanchard, P. et. al. (Hrsg.): Taktische Kernwaffen. Die fragmentierte Abschreckung. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1987
3. Bohrer, K.: Kein Wille zur Macht. In: Bohrer, K. H./Scheel, K. (Hg.): Kein Wille zur Macht. Dekadenz. Sonderheft Merkur. (61) 2007, S. 659-668
4. Brock, L.: Kriege der Demokratien. Eine Variante des demokratischen Friedens. In Anna Geis (Hrsg.): Den Krieg überdenken. Kriegsbegriffe und Kriegstheorien in der Diskussion. Baden Baden: Nomos 2006, S. 203-233
5. Grünbein, D.: Die Verführung zur Freiheit. In: Almut-Barbara Renger (Hrsg.): Mythos Europa. Texte von Ovid bis Heiner Müller. Leipzig: Reclam 2003, S. 220
6. Guéhenno, J. M.: Das Ende der Demokratie. München 1996
7. Ferguson, N.: Der falsche Krieg. Der Erste Weltkrieg und das 20. Jahrhundert. München: DVA 2013
8. Hasse, D.: Was ist europäisch? Zur Überwindung kolonialer und romantischer Denkformen. Stuttgart: Reclam 2021
9. Hoffmann, S.: Der Riss in der Zeit. Kosellecks ungeschriebene Historik. Berlin: Suhrkamp 2023
10. Hondrich, K. O.: Wieder Krieg? Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2002
11. Kocka, J.: Wo liegst du, Europa? Europäische Identität als Konstrukt. In: Helmut König/Manfred Sicking (Hrsg.): Der Irak-Krieg und die Zukunft Europas. Bielefeld: transcript 2004, S. 117-141
12. Koselleck, R.: Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2000
13. Levinas, E.: Totalität und Unendlichkeit. Versuch über die Exteriorität. Freiburg/München: Karl Alber 1987
14. Liebsch, B.: Einander ausgesetzt. Der Andere und das Soziale. Band II. Elemente einer Topographie des Zusammenlebens. München/Freiburg: Karl Alber 2018, Band II.
15. Maus, I.: Über Volkssouveränität. Elemente einer Demokratietheorie. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2011
16. Meier, C.: Kultur um der Freiheit willen. Griechische Anfänge – Anfänge Europas? München: Siedler 2009
17. Ders.: Athen. Ein Neubeginn der Weltgeschichte. Berlin: Siedler 1993
18. Münkler, H.: Heroische und postheroische Gesellschaften. In: Bohrer, K. H./Scheel, K. (Hrsg.): Kein Wille zur Macht. Dekadenz. Sonderheft Merkur. (61) 2007, S. 659-668
19. Nicolai, G.: Die Biologie des Krieges. Betrachtungen eines Naturforschers den Deutschen zur Besinnung. Bd. I und II. Verlag Darmstädter Blätter. Darmstadt 1983
20. v. Ranke, L.: Serbien und die Türkei im 19. Jahrhundert. In: Gesammelte Werke, Bd. 43/44, Leipzig 1879, S. 518, zitiert nach Kocka 2004
21. Reemtsma, J. P.: Vertrauen und Gewalt. Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne. Hamburg: Hamburger Edition 2008
22. Reinhart, W.: Geschichte der Staatsgewalt. München: C. H. Beck 1999

23. Wevelsiep, C.: Im Horizont des Allgemeinen. Der sozialpädagogische Diskurs der Moderne. Freiburg: Karl Alber 2022
24. Johann Heinrich Zedler: Grosses vollständiges Universallexikon Aller Wissenschaften. Halle und Leipzig: Verlag Zedler 1732, zitiert nach Hasse 2021