Violence and War in the Modern Age: Approaches and Debates

This seminar intends to analyse the warrior phenomenon before it happens, when it takes places, in the representations and then in the memories. We will use the tools offered by history, and also by political science, philosophy, anthropology, law and even social psychology, psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Without forgetting the chronology, the specificities of the context and of the experiences, and the tactical and strategic points of view, we will first focus on the individual situations. Whilst the 19th and 20th centuries are the primary focus of the seminar, incursions in a wider chronology will occur occasionally. We will work in a comparative perspective. As often as possible, our work will rely on the usage, according to the disciplines, of testimonies, souvenirs, private writings and novels, and also of pictures, movies and possibly documentaries.

Each session will begin with two (if necessary three) presentations (10 to 15 minutes each) about one of the “Essential Readings”, each presentation being followed by a debate. Then, after a debate, one of the professors will propose a short “reprise” about the main themes of the session.

Each student will be responsible for the following:
- Attendance and participation. The latter entails reading the texts, at least the “essential” ones, before the session.
- One presentation about an “Essential Reading”.
- A ten-pages final essay on a different topic than the presentation and to be determined with the professors.

Session 1 (January 29) – The Age of Total War: The Two World Wars (RG)

This opening seminar will provide an introduction to the module. It will address various practical issues concerning the course. At the same time, this seminar will explore the European experience of ‘total war’ in the twentieth century, and more specifically, the period of the two world wars. We will discuss the concept of ‘total war’. This will be followed with a more detailed consideration of ‘total war’ in the context of the two world wars.

Discussion Points

- What is total war?
- Is total war understood best as an ‘ideal type’?
- Is total war a uniquely twentieth century phenomenon?
- What is the relationship between total war and ‘modern war’?
• Was the First World War a total war?

• What was the role of ‘big ideas’ and ideology in the two world wars?

• How useful is the concept of a ‘European Civil War’ in discussing the years 1914-1945?

• Are discussions of the two world wars too Eurocentric?

Essential Reading

Roger Chickering ‘World War I and the theory of total war: reflections on the British and German cases, 1914–15’ in Chickering and Förster (eds), Great War, Total War: Combat and Mobilisation on the Western Front (Cambridge, 2000), pp 35–57.


Further Reading


Roger Chickering and Stig Förster (eds), The Shadow of Total War: Europe, East Asia and the United States, 1919–1939 (Cambridge, 2003), pp 1–23 (introduction)


This seminar will explore the individual experience of war in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.
We will study the ways and means to create efficient small units and to lead them on the battlefield. We notably discuss the concept of “primary group”. From the home front to the line, the place devoted to women will be specifically considered.

Discussion Points

• What does training men to kill mean?

• Is the idea of “primary group” relevant?

• What does being a leader imply?

• For what and for whom to die?
• Can women be soldiers?

**Essential Reading**


**Further Reading**


**Session 3 (February 12) – The Active Process of Killing. Suffering. Death (RG).**

This session will focus on the experiences at the heart of war: the experiences of killing and being killed. Reconstructing the ‘logic’ of killing under conditions of war will be part of our discussions, as will be the sources used to reconstruct the experiences of bodily harm, incarceration in POW camps or killing on the battlefield.

**Discussion Points**

- Why has the act of killing been ignored in the literature for so long?
- What are the sources with which we can write an “intimate history” of killing?
- Wounds and mutilations: treatment and care.
- What does dehumanizing the enemy mean?
• Being a prisoner: a bodily experience?

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Session 4 (February 19) – Men and Women in Resistance. Memories (GP).

This session will be specifically devoted to the fighting the resistance, both interior and external. We will consider the reasons for choosing to fight on the national soil of to go abroad in order to fight back. We will study the specificities of the clandestine world (sociability, leadership, danger and death, etc.). We will address the issues raised by the memories of the resistance.

Discussion Points

• Why committing oneself in the resistance?

• Ways and means of a clandestine war.

• Sociability and hierarchy in the resistance.
• Can women be resistance fighters?
• What does death mean for the resistance fighters?
• What are the specificities of a war of partisans?
• Why choosing combatant exile, and what for

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Session 5 (March 5) – Violence and Decolonisation: The British Experience (RG).

This seminar focuses on the violence that accompanied European decolonisation after the Second World War. It will begin with a general discussion of violence as a feature of the decolonisation process. This will be followed with a more detailed discussion of the British experience of colonial counter-insurgency in this period and the ways in which it compared to that of other European powers such as France and the Netherlands.

Discussion Points

• In what ways were European powers ‘exporters of violence’ in the decades following the Second World War?

• How effective were European counter-insurgency campaigns in the colonial world after 1945?
• How peaceful was the British experience of decolonization?

• What forms of coercion did the British employ during colonial disturbances?

• How consistent were British methods of counterinsurgency with humanitarian principles?

• Were British methods any less violent than those of other colonial powers?

• How might we account for the differing levels of violence employed by Britain against various colonial insurgencies in this period?

**Essential Reading**


**Further Reading**


Martin Thomas, Bob Moore and L. J. Butler, *Crises of Empire: Decolonization and Europe's Imperial Nation States, 1918-1975*, pp 318–345 (chapter 13)


Session 6 (March 12) – War and the Environment (GP).

This session intends to apply to the warrior phenomenon some of the issues raised by the history of environment. We will try to (re)consider war from an environmental point of view. We will analyse the consequences of the environment on the ways and the means to wage war, and on the fighters both during the fighting and after.

Discussion Points

• Theatres of operations and evolution of the combat methods.
• Is it possible to master the environment in order to wage war?
• Logistics issues.
• Is nature the main enemy of the warriors?
• The environment: the first victim of the war?

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Session 7 (March 19) – Genocide. From Africa to Auschwitz to Cambodia to Rwanda (RG).

This seminar examines the colonial origins of extreme violence in Europe. It will focus on the historical debate concerning the extent to which imperial Germany’s violence against native peoples in South-West Africa acted as a direct influence on the genocidal policies of the Nazi regime. We will also discuss why genocides continued to occur in the world after the horrors of Auschwitz.
Discussion Points

- In what ways can colonial experiences be seen to have influenced the extreme violence of twentieth century Europe?
- Can the colonial violence of European powers be considered as acts of genocide?
- In what ways is Germany’s colonial past claimed to have influenced the genocidal policies of the Nazis?
- Can fascism be considered as a form of colonialism?
- Why did the defeat of Nazi Germany not end the history of genocide?

Essential Reading

Robert Gerwarth and Stephen Malinowski, ‘Hannah Arendt’s Ghosts: reflections on the disputable path from Windhoek to Auschwitz’ in Central European History, 42, pp 279–300

Jürgen Zimmerer, ‘Annihilation in Africa: the ‘race war’ in German South West Africa (1904–1908) and its significance for a global history of genocide’ in German Historical Institute Bulletin, no. 37 (Fall 2005), pp 51–57

Dirk Moses and Donald Bloxham, “Genocide”, in Gerwarth / Bloxham (eds.) Political Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe.

Further Reading


Isabel Hull, ‘The military campaign in German Southwest Africa, 1904–1907’ in German Historical Institute Bulletin, no. 37 (Fall 2005), pp 39–44


Session 8 (March 26) – Extreme Violence and Ethnic Cleansing. From Armenia to WWII to Former Yugoslavia (GP)

This session examines extreme violence throughout the twentieth century. It will study the reasons why the “laws of war” were deliberately ignored, notably (but not only) concerning the civilians. It will try to analyse the processes that lead to extreme violence and the ways through which individuals can become perpetrators. It will consider the consequences of such a violence both on the victims and on the perpetrators.

Discussion Points

- Why did twentieth century warfare deliberately target civilians?
- What constitutes a “war crime”?
• What does a rape mean?
• What are the consequences of torture?
• “Ordinary men” committing extraordinary crimes?
• What questions does extreme violence ask to historians and to scientists?

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Session 9 (April 2) – Terrorism (RG).

This seminar explores terrorism in twentieth century Europe. It will begin with a general discussion about the definitions of terrorism, and the evolution of terrorist violence in Europe during the long twentieth century. This will be followed by a consideration of the Irish
Republican Army in Northern Ireland and the Red Army Faction in Germany as examples of ‘Pseudo-colonial’ and ‘New Left’ terrorism in the 1970s.

Discussion Points

• How can ‘terrorism’ best be defined?

• Is ‘terrorism’ a useful term for historians?

• What types of political entities use ‘terrorist’ methods?

• What does a historical analysis of ‘terrorism’ in twentieth century Europe tell us about the phenomenon more generally?

• How does the violence of the IRA relate to our understanding of ‘terrorism’?

• How important is sectarianism in understanding IRA violence?

• How does the violence of the RAF relate to our understanding of ‘terrorism’?

• How important is the trauma of Germany’s Nazi past in explaining the violence of the RAF?

Essential Reading


Jeremy Varon, Bringing the War Home: the Weather Underground, the Red Army Faction and Revolutionary Violence in the Sixties and Seventies (Berkeley, 2004), pp 196–254 (chapter 5)

Further Reading

Stefan Aust, The Baader-Meinhof Complex (London, 2008), relevant chapters from Part II


This seminar is devoted to the rather complicated process of coming out of war. It will consider the different issues at stake when an individual tries to resume a “normal” life after having endured war, as a fighter (wearing a uniform or not), as a non-combatant, as a victim, etc. It will analyse the long-term consequences of the emotions provoked by war.

Discussion Points
• What does returning to his or her intimate life mean for a veteran?

• What is a “moral economy of gratitude”?

• Ways and mean of mourning.

• Is a complete cultural demobilization possible?

• Is a psychiatric trauma “for real”? If so, how and by whom can it be detected and then treated?

Essential Reading


Further Reading


Session 11 (April 16) – Coming out of War (II). Brutalization and Paramilitarism (RG).

This seminar will focus on the aftermath of the First World War. Students will be introduced to the concept of ‘brutalization’, and will debate its relative importance in explaining the continuation of violence after 1918 against factors such as counter-revolution, imperial collapse, and the mobilising power of ‘cultures of defeat’. 
### Discussion Points

- In what ways did the First World War brutalize European society?
- How prevalent was paramilitary violence in Europe after the First World War?
- How can we explain this emergence of paramilitary violence in Europe and its uneven distribution?
- In what ways was the First World War claimed to have ‘brutalized’ British society?
- How did these fears of ‘brutalization’ affect British political culture?
- In what ways was German politics and society brutalized by the war?
- In what ways did the experience of defeat shape counter-revolutionary movements in Germany?
- How can we account for the differing experiences of Britain and Germany?

### Essential Reading


### Further Reading

Robert Gerwarth, ‘The central European counter-revolution: paramilitary violence in Germany, Austria and Hungary after the Great War’ in *Past and Present*, no. 200, pp.175–209

Jon Lawrence, ‘Forging a peaceable kingdom: war, violence, and fear of brutalization in post-First World War Britain’ in *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 75, no. 3 (Sep. 2003) pp.557–589


### Session 12 (April 23) – Telling about War (GP).

This seminar considers the various ways to tell what fighting in a war is, and what it means. It will focus on the individuals who try to describe the warrior phenomenon. It will consider some of the specific characters evoked in such descriptions. Last but not least, it will study the long-term consequences of these tellings and of the memories of the war.

### Discussion Points

- Journalism and journalists in / at war?
- Is it possible to tell what war really is?
• What is a hero?
• Myths, representations and stereotypes.
• Memories of the war and policies of memory.
• Resistance: a story impossible to tell – and untold?

Essential Reading


Further Reading


