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What it Means to be a State: States and Violence in Twentieth-Century Europe

“One of the difficulties of the history of ideas is that names are more permanent than things.” Alfred Cobban’s remark can certainly be applied to the long history of the state, whose institutional transformation has often been obscured by the persistence of our political vocabulary. *State* travels all too easily across time and space: we use it to translate Plato’s *polis* and Machiavelli’s *lo stato*, Louis XIV’s *l’état* and Max Weber’s *politischen Anstaltsbetrieb*. The word *state* remains, but what it means to be a state has continually changed.¹

In the history of the state, the relationship between word and thing is complicated by an odd disjunction between theory and practice. The most important theoretical expressions of what it meant to be a state came early, in the classic treatises published by Bodin and Hobbes in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The translation of theories into practice was achieved much more slowly, first in well-established monarchies like England and France, and then, unevenly and imperfectly, in the rest of Europe. This process is the opposite of what Hegel might have expected. Theoretical self-consciousness, he believed, came at the end, not the beginning of a historical movement; the owl of wisdom flew at dusk. But in the case of the state, Minerva’s bird made its appearance at dawn, at the beginning rather than the end of the state’s long day’s journey towards autonomy and authority. When scholars talk about the decline or even the disappearance of *the* state, it is important to keep in mind that the modern state was a rather recent arrival – and had a rather brief run – on the historical stage.

This essay briefly outlines one chapter in the history of what it means to be a state, the chapter that begins around 1900 and ends with our contemporary situation. It should be emphasized from the start that the essay is limited to *European* states – and not states in general. Indeed one of its main arguments is that

European developments are quite unlike those in most of the world, which means that very little of what can be said about «the state» in general is both interesting and true.

I will argue that the key to understanding the difference between what it meant to be a European state at the beginning and at the end of the 20th century is the state’s changing relationship to violence.

The association of political power and violence has ancient roots. It occurs in one of the oldest discussions of politics in the western tradition, a fragment by Pindar from the beginning of the 5th century B.C., which opens with the lines: «Nomos [that is, custom, law, and justice] rules over gods and men, leading them with a firm hand, justifying the most violent.» The medieval political theorist John of Salisbury listed among the prince’s most important attributes was that «he sheds blood without guilt.» Eight centuries later, Max Weber defined the state as «a compulsory political organization [...][whose] administration successfully upholds the claim to the monopoly of legitimate use of physical force in the enforcement of its order.» As has often been noted, Weber’s definition is functional and pragmatic; he describes what states are able to do rather than what they should do. But notice how the word «legitimate» takes us into the realm of ideas, values, and norms – that is, into the realm of Nomos – where, in order to be successful the state’s deployment of violence must be justified. States are defined not simply by their monopoly of violence, but by the nature of those violent means and the ways in which they are legitimated. Here, in these relationships between violence and Nomos are to be found the most profound differences between states at the beginning of the last century and the present.

Is it a mistake to put so much emphasis on violence in thinking about states? Some people think so. The distinguished international lawyer Ian Brownlie, for example, complained that by doing so we ignore the normal, peaceful conduct of states. «It is as though,» he writes, «the operation of the road system was to be reported exclusively in terms of severe accidents, multiple collisions on motorways, and so forth, without an indication of the areas of relatively successful operation and normality.» There is, of course, some truth in Brownlie’s comment; but while accidents may be rare, think of how fundamentally important the possibility of accidents is for the structure, rules, and conduct of our highways – and try to imagine how dramatically different driving would become if,
through some miracle, accidents suddenly became impossible. Thinking about states without legitimate violence presents a similar challenge to our political imaginations.

1. States and Violence at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century

In 1899, Japan was invited to join an international gathering of the great powers for the first time. The irony of this invitation to the Hague Peace Conference was not lost on one Japanese diplomat, who remarked to a European colleague: «We show ourselves at least your equals in scientific butchery, and at once we are admitted to your council tables as civilized men.» He was, of course, absolutely right: a command over «scientific butchery», that is, over the institutions and technology necessary to field an effective military force was indeed a prerequisite to being admitted to the ranks of the powers. The Japanese knew that their place at the council table had been earned by the success of their armies in China – just as their status as a great power would be confirmed by their victory over Russia six years later.

Legally, morally, and practically, the European state was based on its right and ability to use violence, especially in war. «A government that cannot make war,» Alexis de Tocqueville told the French Chamber of Deputies in 1840, «is a detestable government.» «Without war, there would be no state,» Heinrich von Treitschke instructed his students at the University of Berlin. «War», said the Oxford Professor of War, Spenser Wilkinson, «is a fact of human life which cannot be neglected [and] no theory of the state or of British affairs which does not take account of it can safely be trusted.» And even William James, no friend of war, nonetheless called it «the gory nurse that trained societies to cohesiveness.» So far, James reluctantly admitted, «war has been the only force that can discipline a whole community, and until an equivalent discipline is organized, I believe that war must have its way.»

The centrality of organized violence to the meaning of statehood was rooted in the relations of states to one another. Although in 1900 Europe was enjoying the longest period of peace among the great powers in its history, most Europeans recognized that war was possible and a majority of them were resigned to the fact that, eventually, a war would probably come. «The greatest characteristic of modern war,» Wilkinson believed, «is the inevitability that pervades it.» Thus while states sought to resolve their disputes peacefully – and did so with remarkable success between 1870 and 1914 – they lived together in what Hobbes

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7 Wilkinson, War, 7.
called «the condition of war,» which consists «not in actual fighting, but in the known disposition thereto.» In this condition, no power could be confident that its rivals would not resort to violence; no power could afford not to be prepared to meet such a threat; no power could doubt that, however terrible war might be, defeat would be far worse.

Just as the possibility of war was the determinate feature of the international system, so the possibility of being called upon to fight determined the relationship of the citizen to his state. In Carl Schmitt’s memorable phrase from 1932, «As an essential political unity, the state possesses the right to make war, that is, the real possibility to define and combat the enemy.» This gives the state what Schmitt called its «monstrous capacity,» the «possibility to wage war and therefore to exercise the power of life and death over human beings.»

A great deal of the early twentieth-century state’s self presentation had to do with killing and dying, from the weapons on display in military parades, to the monuments to fallen heroes, to the streets and squares named after victorious battles. Schoolbooks, parades, monuments – as well as many other aspects of political culture and civic ritual – were designed to express the importance of patriotism at home and heroism in the field. They were, in other words, supposed to provide the necessary legitimacy to the state’s monopoly of violence and thus to guarantee that it would be able to exercise its power of life and death. This process was both circular and reciprocally reinforcing: the state had to claim superiority to other institutions in order to legitimate its power over life and death; but at the same time, the best evidence of this superiority was the possession of this power, this right to kill and have killed, this «monstrous capacity.»

By the beginning of the twentieth century, this «monstrous capacity» had taken a radically new form. The citizen-army of the French revolution had been institutionalized in the mass reserve armies on the Prusso-German model. Except for Britain, every European power sought to maintain a large standing army, composed of conscripts and professionals, as well as an even larger array of active reservists who could be mobilized and deployed quickly enough to decide the outcome of the war. The models for the armies of the twentieth century were the armies of 1866 and 1870, not the revolutionary armies of 1793–94. The state’s right to call upon its citizens to kill and die, therefore, was a sustained fact of ordinary life for a significant part of its population. But the armies of the early twentieth century had to confront more than just problems of scale: military

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8 T. Hobbes, *Leviathan*, New York 1997, Chapter 13, 70. Avoiding this condition within the commonwealth was, of course, the reason why Hobbes argued for the creation of a sovereign authority.
leaders knew that their troops would have to perform in a radically new and dangerous environment, with and against weapons of unprecedented destructive power. The modern battlefield demanded millions of citizen soldiers with extraordinary discipline and fighting spirit.

Although all the European powers were aware of these demands, each had to confront them in the light of its own traditions, political culture, and strategic position. It would be interesting to compare the debates over the expansion of the army in Germany, the length of military service in France, and the introduction of conscription in Britain in order to uncover both the similarities and differences among these states. But we must be content with noting two common features: first, and most obviously, every state felt the increasing pressure for larger and better trained armies; and second, soldiers and statesmen everywhere worried that changes in modern culture and society were making the creation of such armies more and more difficult.

Colonel Wilhelm Balck, a German expert on tactics, warned that great efforts would be necessary to turn modern civilians into heroic soldiers:

«The steadily improving standards of living tend to increase the instinct of self-preservation and to diminish the spirit of self-sacrifice [...] the fast manner of living at the present day tends to undermine the nervous system, the fanaticism and religious and national enthusiasm of a bygone age is lacking, and finally the physical powers of the human species are also partly diminishing [...] We should [therefore] send our soldiers into battle with a reserve of moral courage great enough to prevent the premature moral and mental depreciation of the individual.»

In the lectures he delivered to the French War College in 1903, Ferdinand Foch made much the same point: Contemporary armies are «bigger and better trained» than Napoleon’s were, but «also more nervous and easily affected.» Two years later, Sir Ian Hamilton worried that «up-to-date civilization is becoming less and less capable of conforming to the antique standards of military virtue.»

Just beneath the surface of the patriotic and militaristic literature that appears everywhere in Europe in the early twentieth century was the fear that the warrior ethos may be fading, that the will to sacrifice, to kill, and if necessary to die for the fatherland, might disappear, leaving the nation defenseless in the face of its enemies.


12 F. Foch, Principles of War, New York 1918, 39;

2. An Alternative Vision of States and Violence  The same assessment of modern society that caused anxiety among soldiers and strategists aroused hope among other contemporaries that war was becoming obsolete. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, social theorists had argued that war and commerce did not mix, a perception that would be repeated by generations of progressive thinkers. Tocqueville, who was by no means a pacifist, nonetheless believed that because commerce was «the natural enemy of all violent passions,» both wars and revolutions would become increasingly rare. «Free trade», Richard Cobden wrote in 1842, «by perfecting intercourse, and securing the dependence of countries one upon the other, must inevitably snatch the power from governments to plunge their peoples into wars.»¹³ This vision of a peaceful international system rested on the conviction that modern life, and especially modern economic life, would fundamentally alter both the relationship among states and that between states and their citizens. Because modern men would no longer want to fight, they would create for themselves states that both guaranteed and required the preservation of peace.

Perhaps the most famous early twentieth century version of these ideas was Norman Angell’s Great Illusion, first published in 1910, which was translated into twenty-five languages and sold over two million copies.

Angell did not argue that war was now impossible – the «illusion» in his title refers to war’s profitability not its possibility (the title of the German translation, Die falsche Rechnung, gives a better sense of Angell’s argument). Modern economic relations among states, he argued, made conquest both unnecessary and destructive. But while he feared that statesmen would not listen to this logic, he also believed that society itself was becoming more peaceful, that, in his words, Europeans were «losing the psychological impulse to kill their neighbors». And how, he asked, could it be otherwise? «How can modern life, with its overpowering proportion of industrial activities and its infinitesimal proportion of military ones, keep alive the instincts associated with war as against those developed by peace?»¹⁴

Despite the extraordinary violence that marked European history in the first half of the twentieth century, Angell’s views were repeated – and not only by himself – over and over again. In 1919, Joseph Schumpeter, for instance, argued that what he called the «imperialist impulse […] which rests on the primitive contingencies of physical combat [would] gradually disappear, washed away by the exigencies of daily life». Capitalism, Schumpeter was convinced, would eventually shift violent energies to economic pursuits. «Wars of conquest and adventurism in foreign policy in general are bound to be regarded as troublesome

distractions, destructive of life’s meaning, a diversion from the accustomed and therefore «true» task» – which was, Schumpeter believed, productive labor in all its forms.\(^\text{15}\)

David Mitrany, a Rumanian born economist who worked in both Britain and the United States, gave a particularly influential formulation of these ideas, first in a lecture at Yale University in 1932, and then in a series of publications that provided the theoretical foundation for what is often called «functionalism». In 1932, Mitrany was responding to the manifest inability of the League of Nations to create a new world order. The League failed, he argued, because it started at the wrong end of the state’s activities, at the top rather than the bottom of its functions. As he put it, «Sovereignty cannot [...] be transferred effectively through a formula, only through a function». Rather than trying to persuade or compel states to abandon their sovereign independence, internationalists should build on their cooperation in everyday activities such as delivering the mail, regulating shipping, promoting trade, preventing disease. «Cooperation» in these functions, «would overlay political divisions with a spreading web of international activities and agencies, in which and through which the interests and life of all nations would be integrated.» Eventually boundaries would become «meaningless through the continuous development of common activities and interests across them».\(^\text{16}\)

As with all such visions, Mitrany’s conception of international society was inseparable from his conception of domestic affairs. The functional cooperation among states was, he believed, similar to – and in many ways driven by – changes taking place in the relationship between the state and society. Here too patterns of connection and cooperation were becoming more intense and complex; and here too issues of the state’s sovereignty were losing their importance. As he wrote in 1959, «The idea of the welfare state is already broadening into a sentiment for a welfare world.»\(^\text{17}\)

Observers like Angell, Schumpeter, and Mitrany imagined a dramatically different sort of state than Treitschke, Wilkinson and Weber, a state defined by commerce and production rather than by war and violence. In their vision of a society of states, violence might still be possible, but it would become increasingly irrelevant: why conquer France in order to send a package to Paris or buy a villa in Provence? And while states might retain Carl Schmitt’s «monstrous capacity,» it would be of diminishing importance for the practical life of the state or its citizens.

In the light of the great wars of the twentieth century, it is all too easy to view these pacific predictions with irony or contempt, dismissing them as wishful


\(^{17}\) Mitrany, *Peace System*, 17 (quot. a work pub. 1959).
thinking or willful illusions. E. H. Carr’s *Twenty Years Crisis* can stand as the exemplar of that sort of response.  

But perhaps we should not be so hasty. After all, it would be wrong to overlook the changing role of war in European international system: in the course of the nineteenth century, war ceased to become an instrument of policy as it had been for three centuries; after 1870, European states no longer fought one another for a piece of territory or over a matter of dynastic prestige – war came in 1914 because several great powers believed (rightly or wrongly) that their existence was at stake; war came in 1939 because the government of one great power – and only one – wanted to fight. Nor should we disregard without closer examination the views of those who said that there was a tension between the demands of military service and the exigencies of ordinary life in modern societies. Of course Europeans were willing to fight, to kill and to die in extraordinary numbers. Do we really know why? Can we be sure about the blend of coercion, calculation, and commitment that sustained the mass armies of 1914 to 1918 and 1939 to 1945?  

And finally, thinkers like Angell, Schumpeter, and Mitrany have a claim to our attention because the Europe of today, the Europe of 2003, resembles their vision much more than that of Treitschke, Wilkinson, or Weber.

3. The Future of an Illusion: States and Violence in Europe after 1945

There was always a tension between what Schumpeter called «the exigencies of daily life» and the state’s need to mobilize and discipline its citizens for modern war. At the beginning of the 20th century European states did a great deal to overcome – and perhaps also to conceal – this tension. In the end, of course, states were able to do so. How and why is by no means obvious, but it is clear that war trumped commerce; security, welfare; the survival of the state, «the exigencies of daily life». Functionalists like Mitrany were wrong, therefore, when they supposed that «a spreading web» of international cooperation would necessarily make war irrelevant. Actually the causal connection runs the other way: only when war became irrelevant did a seamless web of cooperation among states become possible. To think otherwise is to fall into the error Ludwig Wittgenstein had in mind when he warned us against asking questions like, «At what time does the Cambridge Station reach the train from London?»  

The historical train that carried the European states to a new stage in their history after 1945 was not the inevitable, autonomous process of social and economic change that generations of social theorists had predicted and hoped for. Rather it was a series of political decisions, which were made by and for states by political leaders doing what they have always done, defending their interests and values.

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18 For an introduction to Carr and the tradition he represented, see J. Haslam, *No Virtue like Necessity: Realist Thought in International Relations since Machiavelli*, New Haven/Conn. 2002.
We cannot trace this process here. Nor is it necessary to do so. However complex and problematic in detail and emphasis, the overall outline of the narrative is familiar enough. In contrast to the situation after 1919, after 1945 the United States and the Soviet Union imposed an international order on the European states. By means of this order, which was reinforced by the mutual fear of nuclear catastrophe, the superpowers removed both the possibility and necessity of war in Europe, largely by resolving the German problem, the most significant source of conflict between 1919 and 1945. On both sides of the east-west divide, the European states became dependent on a superpower for their security. In the east, the participating states had little choice in the matter; in 1956 and again in 1968, attempts at foreign political autonomy were swiftly repressed by Soviet troops. In the west, the situation was more complex since the state’s dependence on the United States was, to some degree at least voluntary. As Harold Cleveland pointed out in 1966,

«surely it is without precedent that 250 Million talented people, with a rapidly growing industrial economy, who in World War II had more than 20 million men under arms, who outrank the Soviet Union in every measure of military potential except land area, nevertheless depend for their security on the guarantee of one ally 3000 miles away.»

The postwar system allowed Europeans to shape what the Danish political scientist Ole Waever has called a «non-war» community, by which he means an international order in which problems of security become increasingly less important as the possibility of armed conflict fades.

The most obvious result of this was the formation of a community of western European states in which each member accepted limitations on its sovereign authority that would have been unthinkable at the beginning of the century. States did not formally renounce their monopoly over legitimate violence – indeed their capacity for violence remained. But the salience of this monopoly declined as intrastate violence was displaced from the European scene. Violence was no longer thought to be a regrettable but inevitable part of the international order, but rather came to be regarded as something pathological, a form of disease or disorder that might eventually be removed from the body politic. States needed police forces to maintain order, not armies to conquer or defend territory.

The displacement of violence has had profound consequences not only for the relations among the European states but also for the relationship between Europeans and their states. Everywhere in Europe this relationship has been demilitarized. The symbols and ceremonies of statehood have lost their military

character – when, for example, was the last European street named after a battle?\textsuperscript{21}

Patriotic virtues have lost their place in both official and popular culture. Even where conscription remains – and the number of states with universal military service is steadily diminishing – it has lost much of its importance and effectiveness: in the Federal Republic, for instance, only 142,000 of those eligible for the draft in 1997 served in the Bundeswehr, 154,000 did alternative service. In short, European states no longer feel the need to create citizens willing to fight and die for them. «Sacrifice in battle,» Michael Ignatieff wrote recently, «has become implausible or ironic in the course of the twentieth century as the gulf between military and civil values has grown.» Most Europeans now live in what Edward Luttwak has called a «post-heroic» culture.\textsuperscript{22} For the first time since the French Revolution, they can now assume that their states will not ask them to kill or die. Schmitt’s «monstrous capacity», while present in theory, has grown increasingly remote and irrelevant in practice.

While European states have responded to the changing role of violence in different ways, throughout the European community the role of violence has been eclipsed, in both meanings of the word – that is, it has diminished and, in the astronomical sense, it has been obscured from view by other, more immediate concerns – for social equality, economic prosperity, and public welfare. People now relate to their states in much the same way they relate to a variety of other forms of power and authority; the distinction between regional, state, and international institutions is declining, as is the distinction between private and public institutions.

Of course states are still important, still powerful, still necessary. And of course they still possess formidable means of violence and enormous coercive capacities. But the emotional demands they once made upon their citizens have greatly diminished, just as their citizens’ emotional investment in the state has dramatically declined. Because violence is no longer at the center of statehood, what it means to be a European state has been fundamentally transformed. How else, for instance, can we understand the willingness of states to surrender exclusive control over their territory and the eagerness of some individuals to become citizens of more than one state?

\textsuperscript{21} Note, for example, the absence of military references in the symbols examined in Margarete Myers Feinstein’s recent book: State Symbols: The Quest for Legitimacy in the Federal Republic of Germany and the German Democratic Republic, 1949–1959, Boston/Mass. 2001.

4. Some Concluding Reflections  
During the early days of western European integration, one often heard that Europe represented the future of mankind, that it was, in Ernst Haas’s enthusiastic phrase, a «living laboratory» in which one could see the emergence of global institutions.23 We hear such expressions of unqualified optimism less frequently these days, but a great deal of international relations theory is still implicitly based on the European experience. The promise of peace and progress conveyed by the idea of «globalization,» for example, seems to rest on the European experience rather than on an examination of what the process has meant in much of Africa and the Middle East.

In fact, since 1945 the international order in Europe has become less rather than more like most of the non-European world. This should not surprise us when we recall that the postwar order was the product of particular historical circumstances that are not likely to be repeated elsewhere. Europe, therefore, is separated from its neighbors by a fundamentally important but sometimes overlooked frontier, the one that separates states for which violence is still either a reality or a real possibility and those for which it is not. We might disagree about where to draw this boundary, but it is apparent that what it means to be a state, both internationally and domestically, is vastly different on either side of it.24

Among the most pressing questions confronting contemporary Europeans is how they will deal with the violent world beyond their borders. There seem to be no more than three alternatives.

The first alternative is some version of the status quo, that is, a continued reliance on the United States probably through some kind of reformed NATO. During the Cold War, Western Europe’s dependence on the United States seemed unavoidable, despite the recurrent tensions within the alliance. Since 1989, however, transatlantic security relations have become increasingly problematic, in part because of real difference over specific issues – most recently, about how to deal with Iraq – and in part because the United States continues to regard the use of violence as a legitimate, indeed central aspect of international politics. In other words, contemporary debates and distrust between Washington and its European allies are deeply rooted in different conceptions of what it means to be a state.25 Paradoxically, the displacement of violence within the European society of states may make cooperation with the United States simultaneously more difficult and more necessary.

The second alternative would be for Europeans not to have a security policy at all, that is, to assume that the world is indeed becoming more and more like Europe itself, a society of interdependent states in which, because war is no longer

25 For a formulation of these differences from an American perspective, see R. Kagan’s polemical essay, Of Paradise and Power: America and Europe in the New World Order, New York 2003.
an option, a force that can be projected outside of Europe is no longer necessary. Essentially, this means resting European security on hope – always a pleasant companion, but a notoriously poor guide. To try to exist without a credible means of self-defense is rather like canceling one’s insurance policies because one has not had a fire recently. War may be unthinkable in Europe, but the world beyond is full of combustible material.

The final alternative would be for Europeans to join together and construct a security force that might be allied with, but would be essentially independent from, the United States. For more than a decade there has been a great deal of talk about this; more recently, a few tentative practical steps, for example, the European Union military mission in Macedonia that began in March 2003, have been taken. And yet precisely because the ratio of talk to action is so unfavorable, one must wonder if this is really a possibility or, as there is reason to fear, only a way of choosing the second option without actually saying so. Of course establishing an effective European force would not be easy – the budgetary problems alone are formidable, especially at a time when every European state is hard pressed to meet its obligations. But creating the values that could give such a force legitimacy would be harder still. Finding what Pindar called the Nomos necessary to justify the use of violence in Europe’s name would mean the creation of a different kind of European state.

### ABSTRACTS

**Was es heißt ein Staat zu sein: Staaten und Gewalt im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts**

Ce que signifie être un état: États et violence dans l’Europe du 20ème siècle

Juridiquement, moralement et pratiquement, l’état européen moderne reposait sur son droit et sa capacité d’exercer la violence, particulièrement en temps de guerre. Jusqu’en 1945, la possibilité de guerre déterminait les relations entre états comme entre chaque état et ses citoyens. Ce que Carl Schmitt nommait «le pouvoir immense» de l’état, soit le pouvoir de disposer de la vie et du mort des hommes, façonnait sa culture politique. Après la deuxième guerre mondiale une guerre entre états européens devenait hautement improbable. En conséquence, la violence fut évacuée de l’ordre international comme de l’ordre intérieur. La signification de l’état a donc dramatiquement changé aujourd’hui, si on la compare à ce qu’elle était au début du 20ème siècle.

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