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Political Violence in France and Italy after 1918

1. Elements of comparison  The fact that the First World War gave birth to a series of violent domestic disturbances that constituted a major challenge to European societies may be considered a mere truism. But whenever historians and social scientists discuss the reasons and raise the crucial questions of the social, political, ideological, and cultural conditions of violence, things become more difficult. Was political violence a common European phenomenon after the war? Or was it endemic to certain countries like Germany or Italy? In the presence of the infinite complexity of historical phenomena there is no single theory that offers a comprehensive explanation of political violence.¹ On the other hand, comparative approaches may help, at least for the sake of analysis, to distinguish general developments from national peculiarities and thereby sharpen the eye for the genuinely historic conditions of violence in a given period, country or region. When dealing with political violence after World War I, comparative studies have mostly focused on fascism and fascist movements in Europe.² Moreover, it is Germany and Italy, the «fascist core countries»,³ that have attracted the most attention. The present article, however, will put the cases of France and Italy in a comparative perspective. At first sight, this may seem a rather odd undertaking because France and Italy seem to represent completely different cases. While few historians would disagree that violence was an intrinsic element of rising Italian fascism – if not even its «substance»⁴ – there is a rather broad consensus that


French society during and after the First World War was basically peaceful. But looking at the French case can be illuminating with regards to Italy: first by demonstrating the French influences on Italian syndicalism and fascism, second by underlining those elements that were unique to the history of violence in Italy after the First World War and, consequently, defy generalization. Third, by analysing the French post-war republic with the Italian experience in mind one can discern certain similar potentials. Although there is no doubt that political violence was played out on a much lesser scale in France and without any tendency to degenerate into a «fascist» dictatorship, it has yet to be asked how far some elements of the historiographical consensus on French post-war society need reconsideration. For the historian doing empirical comparative research, the challenge lies in the problem of isolating analytically common European factors from «individual» national ones. In the outcome, this should allow for some progress on the twisted path to a truly «European» history as well as for new insights into national special paths (Sonderwege).

But what is to be understood by «violence»? At least for the sake of analysis, we can discern several types of violence that were present in the French and Italian post-war societies. First there were those more or less spontaneous riots that were caused by high prices and actual distress and which were directed against concrete objectives or persons like bakeries and grocers. In these cases violence can be seen as the result of a «moral economy»-attitude which fitted easily into a more traditional, pre-industrial pattern of food riots. Immediately after the war, in France as well as in Italy, this type of action formed a marked expression of collective violence, e.g. in 1919 as a massive increase in prices caused widespread resentment, especially among the lower and middle urban classes.\(^5\) While these forms of spontaneous action basically did not differ very much, whether they occurred in Paris or in Ferrara, other «pre-modern» uses of political violence met with different circumstances in Italy compared to those in France. France, and in particular Paris knew a sort of «blanquist» tradition which romanticized barricade struggles in the past and inspired dreams of new uprisings. Throughout the 19th century, the capital’s revolutionary proclivities were demonstrated by barricades and journées révolutionnaires, culminating in the Commune of Paris 1871.\(^6\) In the Third Republic, however, the role Paris played in the political life of the country changed. With the republic and universal suffrage established, the weight of

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political opinion shifted to the provinces. Times had passed when Paris and its people could overthrow political systems and establish new ones. At the same time, and as a result of the forced Haussmannisation, the political profile of Paris became more and more "rightist"\(^7\), while the Parisian suburbs, the famous banlieue rouge, rose to be the stronghold of the French working-class movement.

If, in Italy, comparable "romantic" phenomena did exist, they followed a quite different logic and were based on markedly different traditions. In 19th century France "blanquist" violence emanated from attempts at taking over power and was directed against a well-established central state. And even after 1918, there was a certain continuation of the blanquist tradition, mostly shown by anarchist, syndicalist and early communist militants who dreamt the futile dream of overcoming the republic by direct action.\(^8\) In Italy, however, it was the myth of risorgimento that fostered "romantic" attitudes to collective violence. And under the conditions of the World War, romantic nationalism that had its roots in the 19th century experience was easily transformed to a new sort of national revolutionary combattentismo.\(^9\)

Food riots and "blanquist" uprisings belong to the pre-democratic and pre-industrial age or, as it were, to the "rebellious" 19th century.\(^10\) Their counterpart is the authoritarian state; while, in modern democracies, these forms of violence reveal their anachronistic character. Yet, after the First World War a new type of violence emerged. In terms of intellectual history, it is true, the seeds had already been sown by 1914; but it was due to the specific historical situation after the war that this new type of violence gained momentum. It was developed on the very ground of liberal democracy and came from the calculated use or at least the deliberate provocation of violence in the context of political mass mobilization. This implied the radical dismissal of the established legal norms. What counted, however, was a minority political will in the name of a superior moral principle, which went beyond "bourgeois" legality. That is why the age of violence after the First World War might be labelled the "Sorelian age", referring to Georges Sorel's Reflections on Violence, which were published in 1906.\(^11\) A central watchword in this context was "self-defence", which very often meant nothing else but physical violence against the police or the political enemy. "Self-defence" was a notion that implied the more or less radical dismissal of the legal instruments for maintaining public order and it was used to fight or, at least, to undermine the authority of

\(^8\) A. Wirsching, Vom Weltkrieg zum Bürgerkrieg? Politischer Extremismus in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/39. Berlin und Paris im Vergleich, Munich 1999, 47, 100.
the constitutional state in the long run. Apart from Soviet Russia, and confined to the orbit of ‘Western’ liberal constitutional states, the first case in which this new type of violence appeared was Italian fascism.

2. The war experience and the left  By 1914, Italian nationalists, after having broken with the paradigms of rational progressivism and liberal parliamentarism, were longing for the social remedy of a ‘Great War’. War was supposed to alleviate Italy’s internal strains and extirpate the many evils that were perceived.12 It was this ‘cultural’ attitude to war and violence – for which there were some parallels in Wilhelmine Germany – that became the most effective intellectual force to nourish interventionism during the First World War. If young men with a bourgeois background, often students, were initially most attracted by nationalist combative values,13 this tendency gained its real strength by the fusion with an important faction of revolutionary syndicalism. Syndicalists, too, began to reconsider their beliefs concerning the relationship between class and nation. While contemporary society before 1914 was ‘heading for disorder, moral anarchy and paralysis’, as the syndicalist intellectual and future fascist Agostino Lanzillo wrote in 1918, war was ‘a reaction against decomposition’. Having ‘abolished classes and given the nation back its firm sense of unity’, the war had also destroyed socialism and pacifism. Even more, this war was revolution, the result of which was that ‘everything is being transformed in a bloody and legendary regeneration’.14 In fact, by 1914, Italy’s political culture had become tinged with a comparatively strong current of ‘left’ interventionism promoted by renegade socialists and syndicalists.

In terms of intellectual history, this can be traced back to French origins. Zeev Sternhell, in particular, has strongly argued in favour of a more or less direct intellectual descent from Georges Sorel to Italian left interventionism and to Italian fascism.15 In France, similar developments were confined to rather small intellectual circles like the Cercle Proudhon, where members of the Action française met with dissenting syndicalists such as Georges Gressent (alias Valois) to discuss new perspectives concerning a revolutionary synthesis of nationalism and syndicalism.16 In Italy, however, the idea of such a synthesis gained momentum within the syndicalist movement itself. Sternhell’s theses, it is true, have been
submitted to much criticism and scholarly controversy, above all with respect to his conception of French «fascism». But as far as Italy is concerned, it would be difficult to deny that, by 1914, «left» interventionism had become a political force of some significance and helped to bring about the decision of 1915 when Italy went to war taking sides with the Entente. With respect to the history of French and Italian syndicalism and socialism, that meant an important difference and an almost inverse development.

Within Italy in August 1914, the majority of the working class movement, true to its principles of internationalism and pacifism, supported the country’s non-intervention and its neutrality. But right from the beginning there emerged an important dissenting faction mostly consisting of left revolutionaries. Already in 1911, some revolutionary syndicalists supported the government’s decision to wage war with Turkey. On August 18, 1914, the local syndicalist leader in Milan, Alceste de Ambris, violently attacked the idea of neutrality and urged support for the Entente against the «Teutonic» threat. This war, de Ambris said, would rise to the same historic level as the French Revolution. And in October 1914, minority leaders of Italian syndicalism founded the Fascio Rivoluzionario d’Azione Internazionalista, and strongly argued in favour of Italy’s participation in the war. While the extreme left in France dismissed the war and tended to a «defeatist» position, elements of its Italian counterpart took up an exactly opposite attitude.

The most energetic advocate of interventionism and at once the most ardent disciple of the theory of minority avantgardism was Benito Mussolini. After having broken with the socialists’ official doctrine of neutrality, he demanded Italy’s intervention in the autumn of 1914 and was consequently expelled from the party. Joining the left interventionists, Mussolini all the more zealously adhered to the myth of the revolutionary and cultural values of war and founded, on March 23, 1919, the fascist movement. Among the militants of the first hour one could find many revolutionary syndicalists, including Agostino Lanzillo and Michele Bianchi. With collective mentalities bewildered by the devastating war experience, the political landscape in Italy differed substantially from that in France. Those forces of the far left that believed most strongly in the historic role of

18 Sternhell et al., Naissance, 186–187.
19 Ibid., 188–189. Cf. Lanzillo, Disfatta, 201: «This war has the closest, I would even say visible, links, political, ideological and historical, with the great revolution.»
20 There are, of course, exceptions, the most famous being probably Gustave Hervé who turned from syndicalism to extreme nationalism and renamed his journal La guerre sociale into La Victoire after 1914. But at no moment did these forces gain any momentum that would be comparable to that of the Italian left interventionism.
22 Sternhell et al., Naissance, 192.
a *minorité agissante* had irreversibly broken with socialism and decided to burn their bridges. Having embraced the cause of the warring nation, they appealed to old and young nationalists. By 1920, parallel to the stunning electoral successes of the socialists, a new synthesis of revolutionary syndicalism, nationalism, and juvenile *combattentismo* had emerged, tinged with Sorelian thinking and with an implacable hatred of Marxian socialism. It was this camp that was most ready to legitimate the use of violence to reach its goals. Thus, the fusion of demagoguery, extreme nationalism, social reaction, and anti-socialism that had accompanied the Italian intervention of 1915 became the hotbed of fascism. The national war ended in civil war.

Although the war experience was even more devastating in France, there was nothing comparable to Italian fascism in the initial postwar years. In France, on the left, the idea of a *minorité agissante* — the aims of which would legitimize extra-legal violent action — was largely confined to the minority of those syndicalists and socialists who dissented from the French version of the war consensus that had been accepted by the reformist leaders of the Socialist party (S.F.I.O.) and the *Confédération Générale du Travail* (C.G.T.). That is why during the war and its aftermath, any violent challenge to the established order of the Third French Republic came almost exclusively from the far left. Militants who had already attacked the *union sacrée* during the war belonged to the minority of convinced revolutionaries within the C.G.T. or the S.F.I.O. It was revolutionary syndicalism and the socialism of the far left, tinged with bolshevism, which insisted on revolutionary violence as a method to overthrow the capitalist system which was accused of having caused the war. After the end of war French revolutionaries were convinced that the day of reckoning had arrived. «There are and there will be more and more men and women with us», the syndicalist Pierre Monatte wrote in June 1919, «who will never pardon capitalist society for having begun the world war which has devoured their children. We will neither pardon nor forget!».

It was this mentality that motivated collective action and the call for revolutionary violence in France in 1919 and 1920. While the social and political
outcome of victory was widely deemed insufficient, the resulting deception was bound up with a deep-rooted resentment aimed at the traditional leadership of working-class organizations. Left wing socialists, early communists and revolutionary syndicalists agreed that the trade union and socialist leaders had prostituted themselves by sustaining the national war effort, and by failing to abrogate the principles of liberal democracy in favour of the general strike or the proletarian dictatorship. This resentment was particularly strong within the rank and file of the metal and railway workers, and in the Paris region which had carried the main burden of the economic war effort. It was shared by many thousands of workers who had recently come back from the front.

It was this atmosphere with its sense of betrayal and moral indignation expressed by the Left that generated violent action in France in 1919 and 1920. While the political system of the Third Republic, with a conservative government of national union at its head, had seemingly been confirmed by the victory, there was nevertheless serious street-fighting in Paris on May 1st, 1919, with one dead and many wounded demonstrators.26 During the summer of that year, when a spontaneous general strike of the Parisian metalworkers reached its culmination, the French capital was steeped in a revolutionary atmosphere.27 This situation reappeared in the spring of 1920, when the railway workers attempted a general strike.28 It is not surprising that revolutionary syndicalism should have offered an important platform for the wide-spread working-class resentment. Against the background of a war economy marked by an unprecedented degree of industrial concentration, rationalisation and state intervention, revolutionary syndicalism ensured the cohesion of a working class whose structure was rapidly changing. Categorically dismissing any form of parliamentary politics or representative organization and calling for direct action, revolutionary syndicalism tied together the interests of skilled workers and those numerous, younger and less qualified people who had only recently been integrated into the industrial workforce. For such a «working class in transition»29, with its many disappointments and grievances accumulated by the war, revolutionary syndicalism temporarily formed the adequate outlet. It was only after the utter failure of that syndicalist movement that communism, with its emphasis on organisation and party discipline, had its way in France.

In Italy, the immediate postwar years saw the heyday of socialism. Based on its great electoral successes during the biennio rosso 1919/20, and in spite of Gabriele D’Annunzio’s Fiume adventure, which diverted public attention from the more profound processes within Italy, the Italian socialist party seemed able to lead the

26 M. Rodriguez, Le 1er Mai (Collection Archives), Paris 1990, 48–56.
country into a new era. The war economy in Italy had also produced a large shift in the industrial workforce. As it had been the case in France with Renault, Citroën and other firms, big war plants with ten thousands of workers had emerged in the industrial centers of the north of Italy. Claiming the just reward for their privations during the war and severely hit by economic crisis and inflation, these masses were responsive to socialist rhetoric which, encouraged by the Russian experience, preached «maximalist» aims and promised revolution.\textsuperscript{30} Due to this explosive situation, spontaneous violence was an outgrowth of a long series of local strikes and disturbances. Clashes with the police were frequent and demonstrators were shot more than once.\textsuperscript{31} In September 1920 the movement culminated in the occupation of the factories in the industrial areas of the north.\textsuperscript{32} The occupations ended with the peaceful retreat of the workers after they had obtained substantial improvements in working conditions. But to an intimidated or even frightened middle class the occupation of the factories meant that the road to the social revolution now was open.

Thus, in 1919 and 1920 France and Italy faced an equally important, if to a large extent spontaneous, mass movement of social and political unrest. It gained its momentum from the war experience, the sharpening of social conflict in the war industries and the political rhetoric of revolutionary syndicalism and socialism. The reactions, however, these movements provoked in France and in Italy differed very strongly. With the Italian government largely keeping aloof from the conflict, the eruption of fascism and its mass support dated only from the autumn of 1920. It has often been observed that it was the strike movement and the occupation of the factories that precipitated the full mobilisation of fascism. In the winter of 1920/1921, fascism mobilized its troops, consisting of young veterans, the ardit in particular, students, deceived syndicalists and disenchanted members of the middle classes. Concurrent with this enlistment began a period of carefully planned and strategically applied violence. Compared to violence linked to notions of a «moral economy» or the «romantic» elements of blanquist violence, this was a completely new form of violence for a liberal society. Its most notorious and almost «proverbial» form was shown by the so-called spedizioni punitive that were directed towards persons and properties of socialist and syndicalist institutions. Lorries transported rather large numbers of armed squadristi to a certain place. There,

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\item According to the national statistics, 26 persons were killed by police and military forces in 1919, and 92 persons in 1920. See A. Lyttleton, «Faschismus und Gewalt: Sozialer Konflikt und politische Aktion in Italien nach dem Ersten Weltkrieg», in: Mommsen/Hirschfeld (ed.), \textit{Sozialprotest}, 303–324, 310.
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they confronted local functionaries; very often, however, the fascist troops beat them up or even killed them. Yet this would not have been possible without the tacit consent or even support of bourgeois and nationalist politicians, army officers, provincial and local government officials, civil servants and judges. On the other hand, having already reached their peak with the September campaign and remaining without adequate defense against the sheer violence being used against them, socialists, syndicalists and the strike movement suffered a veritable death blow.

In France, it was above all the state itself that took action against the supposed revolutionary menace. Strongly supported by the upper and middle class population, the French state made a concerted effort to contain the threat. Considering the strike weapon as a form of war, as Georges Sorel himself had done, the government tried to mobilize the so-called «good» and «orderly» French to counter the great strike movement. From January 1920 onwards, new groups, named unions civiques, were founded. Technically speaking, they were private associations but, in fact, they were constituted under the tutelage of the prefects. Their objective was to organize the social defense against any revolutionary strike movement and «to help the authorities to repress violence and to fight terrorism». Thus, in 1920 a veritable «army of volunteers» was registered all over France to ensure the functioning of the country’s public services. To be sure, there are some personal continuities from the unions civiques to certain subsequent French «fascist» organisations; and at the same time, critics belonging to the liberal left castigated the unions severely as an «organisation of civil war». But on the other hand, the French government left no doubt that it alone and no one else was responsible for the maintenance of order. In striking contrast to the politics of laissez faire, by which the Italian authorities encouraged fascist violence, the French state was determined to hold its auxiliary troops under tight control. Whereas in Italy the aloofness of the state at once embittered and encouraged Mussolini’s actual or potential followers, there was no room left for any duce to fill the vacuum in France.


34 A. Lyttleton, The Seizure of Power. Fascism in Italy 1919–1929, New York 1973, 39–40; Corner, Fascism, 140–142. Different examples are given by Snowden, Fascist Revolution, 184–185, who instead underlines the factor of «simple weakness and confusion» the authorities were confronted with. Sorel, Réflexions sur la violence, 188.


36 For a more detailed account of the history of the unions civiques see Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 119–124.

38 Ibid., 123.

39 Archives Nationales de France, Paris (A.N.), F7 14608, Grèves des services publics, 8 (Circular of 14 April 1920).
3. Italian peculiarities and fascism The reasons for those differences were due to Italy’s domestic conditions much more than to the repercussions of Orlando’s foreign policy at the Paris Peace conference. The vittoria mutilata was a myth, more or less deliberately invented by D’Annunzio and other nationalists, to gain mass support.\textsuperscript{40} Instead I would like to stress three elements that were all absent in France. The first concerns the relative weakness of the Italian central state and the instability of its constitutional governments that lacked the power of enforcing their authority in the provinces. In regions where law and order were insufficiently enforced, political violence became more frequent.\textsuperscript{41} The history of the rise of fascism mirrored these problems of Italian political culture. In a society which had been built along local and regional communities it was the provincial ras who emerged as the most important and in his sphere almost omnipotent fascist leader. The squadrismo also did not spring up from an industrial mass society, but from provincial communities.\textsuperscript{42} 

Second, there were great differences in the behaviour of the veterans. In France, demobilisation was carried out slowly. With about one half of the army still mobilised in the summer of 1919 that meant that large sections of the young male population remained under military discipline.\textsuperscript{43} In spite of strong protests and demands for a faster demobilisation, this allowed for a gradual and state-controlled transition to civil life. Moreover, for the officers the regular army remained an important field for professional service. Even though the Italian army did not, as did the German one, face a forced demobilisation, the end of the war nonetheless caused substantial frustration among many officers and men. The civilian government neither succeeded in imposing discipline nor in creating circumstances that would have been acceptable to the military elite as a means of reconciling their material interests and political sentiments. On the contrary: insofar as the bitter quarrels on the question of intervention were in some way resumed after the war, many ex-soldiers found themselves in a double-edged position. Facing harassment from the socialists and their large following, they felt abandoned or even betrayed by the constitutional government.\textsuperscript{44} As a result, many officers, arditi, and ordinary ex-soldiers displayed hidden support and open sympathies for, or direct participation in fascism.

In France, where only a tiny minority of the far left had opposed the union sacrée, the nation’s soldiers, the poilus, were welcomed home enthusiastically. While most French veterans were profoundly marked by the horrifying experience of the war in the trenches, thus committing themselves to a pacifist 〈plus...
jamais ça», they gained a central position in the social and political discourse of post-war France. Given their military and patriotic achievements, the war veterans were praised as victorious national heroes and were put into the center of the national commemoration of the war. Thus, the victorious veterans accrued great moral authority, which did not fail to impress the younger generation. If, in normal times, the political and social conflict between the generations might have been acute, this was not the case in France during the early 1920s. Facing a generation of suffering and patriotic sacrifice, the younger generation did not dare to challenge the deserving «war heroes».45

The third point, that reveals decisive Italian peculiarities, concerns the violent agrarian social conflict that was an important factor in the rise of fascism and violence. The role agrarian conflicts played in post-war Italy reflected, to a large extent, the specific structure of the country’s economy. In 1921, ca 56 percent of the active population was occupied in the agrarian sector, while in France the respective figure was 39 percent.46 In the Po valley, in particular, with its highly capitalized agrarian economy, social conflicts were frequent.47 Here, socialist and syndicalist-orientated agrarian leagues had not only succeeded in organising a substantial part of landless agricultural workers but had put pressure on small proprietors and leaseholders to close the rank and file. Before the war, the general agrarian strike in the province of Parma, which took place in the early summer of 1908, was the culmination of a confrontation between organised rural labour and large proprietors. Due to an extraordinarily high level of organisation, more than 33,000 workers were able to strike for eight weeks, and it was only the intervention of the army that put an end to the movement.48 After 1918, with the socialist movement reaching its pinnacle, some local trade unionists were able to exercise an unprecedented degree of power. In this situation, non-organised labourers, small tenants and farmers without sympathies for the socialist movement ran the risk of becoming the victim of compulsion, boycott and physical violence.49 It is therefore not surprising that members of this intermediate rural population were to be particularly responsive to fascist propaganda. As was the case in the industrial sector, it was the great strike movement of 1920 that marked the watershed.50 Many agrarians now turned to fascism and supported *squadrismo* in

49 Corner, *Fascism*, 95–98.
order to strengthen their position in the rural class conflict. In centers like Bologna – where the landholders had suffered a severe defeat in a great agricultural strike – agrarian support was crucial for the rise of fascism, even if this contradicted Mussolini’s expectations. Thus, large sections of the rural propertied and urban middle classes began to accept violence as a legitimate method of social struggle and as an antidote against previous, however magnified, socialist violence. 

«Fascism», the Florence newspaper Nazione observed on January 1st, 1921, «is inevitably a reaction that is often bitter and violent – sometimes exaggeratedly so – but always against an emotional background of maximalist violence. It is the sharp weapon with which the middle class arms itself when it rises up against the force of destruction.» And as Mussolini himself put it in a speech given in Bologna in April 1921: «Our punitive expeditions must always have the character of a just response and a legitimate reprisal.»

But within a very short time, agrarian fascism became notorious for having unleashed an inferno of cruelty and violence that had never been observed in a modern civilised society and that could not even be stopped by Mussolini and the fascist leadership. And it was in vain that Agostino Lanzillo tried to distinguish between the «true» middle class fascism of the cities and agrarian fascism, which he dismissed as a mere instrument of class interest and which he thought inadequately violent and cruel. Once again, this situation had no counterpart in France. Due to a different social structure with fewer large landowners, certain agricultural unions – and even rural communism – had a strong position in some regions, such as the Corrèze; but they followed a different line. These unions appealed primarily to the small farmers and landholders who formed the core of the agricultural population. And it was only in the 1930s that a sort of agrarian fascism arose: the chemises vertes of Henry Dorgerès. If class conflict and agricultural strikes in the wake of the popular front of 1936 played a certain role, the green shirts’ main objective was, however, directed against the state and the new forms of urban modernity that were considered corrupt.

As I hope this analysis has shown, certain factors were crucial in the rise of fascism and the explosion of violence in post-war Italy. Beyond the war experience, which was common to all great European states, these factors reflected the larger problems that were linked to Italy’s peculiarly difficult path to a modern, democratic nation state. In particular, this concerned the weakness of the central government, its inability to impose discipline on the army, the dominance of

51 Lyttleton, Seizure of Power, 57–61.  
52 On the question of the degree and significance of socialist and syndicalist violence in 1919/1920 see Pretti, Lotte, 423–425, and Corner, Fascism, 96.  
53 Quoted in: Snowden, Fascist Revolution, 151.  
54 Quoted in: Alberghi, Fascismo, 306.  
56 M. Kittel, Provinz zwischen Reich und Republik. Politische Mentalitäten in Deutschland und Frankreich 1918–1933/36, Munich 2000, 180–188.  
provincial communities, and, finally, the extremely sharp and unsettled agrarian conflict in the context of a rather backward economy. Together, these symptoms betray the triple crisis of modernisation that Italy had been experiencing since the second half of the 19th century. Besides the transition from an agrarian to an industrial state that had begun recently and was complicated by the country’s rift between the South and the North, there were the problems of constitutional modernisation, with universal suffrage granted only after the war. These problems were further aggravated by the complicated process of nation-building, which was marked by the comparatively late foundation of unified Italy and which was rendered even more difficult by irredentism. The instability of parliamentary politics and the rise of fascism were the outcome of these crises, all of which were catalytically reinforced by the First World War.58

4. French post-war society and the challenge of violence  With regard to the crises discussed above, the case of Italy undoubtedly features some parallels with Germany. This is not so with France.59 By the First World War, France was, next to England, the most firmly established nation state in Europe, with a long experience of bourgeois parliamentarism. Moreover, its economy was rather advanced, without being exposed to the social repercussions of an all too rapid industrial change. Did France, then, after 1918, have a basically homogeneous and peaceful society? The answer is yes, according to a broad historiographical consensus, put forward by French scholars as Antoine Prost, Jean-Jacques Becker, Annette Becker, Serge Berstein and others.60 According to them, French post-war society was characterised by a large degree of inner stability and social harmony; political extremism did exist but without having much significance in the face of constitutional republicanism. It is interesting, however, that not a small number of non-French historians – like Zeev Sternhell, Robert Soucy, and others – have drawn a rather different picture. And indeed, would it not be surprising if a society like that of the French, which had been traditionally marked by sharp political and social conflicts with a great deal of violence, was, after 1918, silently transformed

to a just, peaceful and harmonious one? Might there not be a certain danger that historiography reproduces those images of harmony and peace that the contemporary French were eager to convey about the post-war condition?

In fact, closer analysis shows that even in post-war France a new type of violence began to appear that was already known to Italy and, of course, Germany. Accordingly, it may be seen as a common European phenomenon that was inherent to European history at that time but was displayed and formed quite differently within the respective countries. As the case of Italy demonstrates, much depended on the peculiarities of national traditions, economic structures, social conditions and political cultures. But there are similarities between the Italian and French cases, even if we stress the points that, first, the incidence of violence and political radicalism was much more limited, and second, that the French republic generally succeeded in maintaining public order. Up to 1940, there never was a real danger that French democracy might collapse under pressure from within.

Yet, it was with the rise of communism after 1921, with the attempt of a general strike in 1920, that the new type of violence began to appear in France. The Communist party which, in December of 1920, had emerged as the majority of the Socialist Congress of Tours, attempted to manifest its existence in the streets of Paris. With public demonstrations in Paris normally forbidden, it was events like the funeral of the French socialist veteran Jules Guesde in 1922 or the transfer of Jean Jaures’ remains into the Panthéon in November 1924 that were exploited for communist propaganda in the streets. In the autumn of 1924, the party's leadership left no doubt that it was necessary to get its members ready «for the approaching seizure of power» which required, at the same time, «military preparation».

Even if the communists' efforts to create a paramilitary apparatus remained comparatively unsuccessful, their political impact was considerable. Since 1924, the French extreme right began to adapt the forms of paramilitary organization and political propaganda already known to Italian fascism. Two converging motives lay behind this mobilisation: First, after having been driven from power by the general elections of 1924, the French nationalists sought the ways and means of rallying their forces against the new «cartel» government of left republicans, tolerated by the socialist party. Second, the communist challenge frightened large sections of the middle class and bourgeois milieus; some political leaders, such as former French President Alexandre Millerand, the founder of the Jeunesses Patriotes, Pierre Taittinger, or the ex-syndicalist and former member of the Action française, Georges Valois, did not hesitate to proclaim the state and nation to be endangered by a bolshevist revolution. Thus, this «first wave» of French «fascism» was driven by pressures that were, to some

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63 Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 282–283.
64 Archives de l'Institut des Recherches Marxistes, Paris, No. 64, Bureau politique, 20. 11. 1924.
65 For these efforts see Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 263–268.
66 According to the sub-title of Robert Soucy’s book on French Fascism.
extent, quite similar to Italian conditions in 1920: the existence of a seemingly well organized, although strongly magnified «red menace» and a «weak» constitutional government that did not seem to be capable of ensuring public order and social defense any more. As Millerand who received encouragement both privately and publicly summed up: «If there is violence and shooting there must be no doubt about the resistance being organized by the same methods – even if this is, indeed, a cruel duty. The Russian bolsheviks would never have been able to become the masters of the street, if the honourable people had dared to oppose them there. It is absolutely necessary to come forward oneself. For it would be too late to gather and to organize oneself in the street when the enemy has already taken position in rigid columns.» If, consequently, the extraparliamentary leagues like the Jeunesses Patriotes organized their militants in a paramilitary way and were prepared to go to the limits of legality, the underlying principle was to use «violence against violence», that was to meet the communists’ challenge in the streets and by their own means. While Taittinger’s contemporary, Georges Valois, founded his own movement, the Faisceau, which took Mussolini as the explicit model, the Jeunesses Patriotes officially denied any «fascist» leanings. This did not prevent them, however, from undertaking more than one political pilgrimage to Rome.

I will not go into a detailed discussion here about whether these and other extra-parliamentary groups may be called a French version of «fascism». But what is beyond doubt is the growth of political violence which could be observed in France during the years 1925 and 1926. In most cases, violence arose out of extremist political meetings being disturbed by the respective «enemy». The worst incident took place April 23rd, 1925, when, during an encounter between communists and Jeunesses Patriotes in Paris, four militants were killed and many more wounded.

Compared to Italy (or Germany), however, such instances of paramilitary mobilisation remained limited in France during the twenties. It was only in the early thirties that political violence became a frequent phenomenon in France.

67 See Millerand’s private correspondence with bourgeois sympathizers in: A.N. 470 AP 88 (Millerand papers). His Ligue Républicaine Nationale mustered ca 300,000 members in 1925.
68 A.N. 470 AP 88, [Alexandre Millerand], Principe considérés comme nouveaux dans l’organisation, 5.
69 Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 284–285.
70 Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 479.
71 While French historians have almost unanimously rejected the idea of a French «fascism», that had any significance, others like Sternhell, Soucy, Irvine and myself have argued in favour of it. See ibid., 506–511, and Wirsching, Zeer Sternhell. For the «classic» account which is largely representative of the French historiography see R. Rémond, Les Droites en France, Paris 1982, 206–208. In any case, given the research that has been done in the past 20 years, it should no longer be possible to label the discussion on the existence of a French «fascism» a «lunatic fringe question». Cf. the apt remarks by J. Hellman, The knight monks of Vichy France, Uriage, 1940–1945, Montreal 1993, 3. For an interesting «functional» approach K. J. Müller, «French Fascism and Modernization», in: Journal of Contemporary History 11 (1976), 75–107.
72 Wirsching, Weltkrieg, 541–542.
During that period, not only was the victorious position of France fading, but also the national consensus brought about by the war itself was breaking up. Moreover the economic crisis began to hit France in 1932. The country’s most dramatic crisis between the wars occurred with the Paris riots of February 6th, 1934. At its root lay a mixture of economic distress, political frustration in the wake of the Stavisky scandal, and – as was the case in 1924/25 – the fear of a weak government depending on the good-will of socialist and communist votes. This latter perception haunted large parts of the bourgeois population, as well as the artisans and shopkeepers of the capital. In this context, the question of who was to oversee the Paris police became crucial. When prime minister Edouard Daladier decided to remove the Parisian prefect of the police, Jean Chiappe, who had been popular for his tough attitude towards the communists, the municipal council of Paris chose to intervene. Its majority denounced the «decapitation of the administration of Paris» and expressed fear of communist violence and political disorder spreading in the capital. «The chief of the army of order has been sacrificed to the elements of disorder.»

After the distribution of countless appeals to protest against the government, the next day Paris experienced the last veritable journée révolutionnaire – though originating with the far right –, which left 15 dead and more than a thousand wounded.

What was perhaps more significant than the largely spontaneous uprising itself, was its paving the way for the mobilisation and counter-mobilisation of the far left and the extreme right. In the wake of February 6th, 1934, the political quarantine Paris had been put under broke down. Clashes became frequent in the mid-thirties, as political extremists of both sides not only organised mass demonstrations themselves but tried to invade their opponents’ neighbourhoods in order to prevent them from assembling, selling their newspapers and disseminating their propaganda. Thus, in the months and years following February 1934, the Paris region knew an atmosphere of severe political polarisation and «civil war».

In this context, the question of political violence was flavoured by a marked generational split. Those who were particularly active in «fascist» leagues like Colonel de la Rocque’s Croix de feu – which was, in 1935, with ca 700,000 members far the most important group – or who joined the communist paramilitary
organisations were normally not veterans. Most of them belonged, on the contrary, to a younger generation that had not fought in the war but had been brought up on the home front. It was this generation that, during the 1930s, became particularly susceptible to ideologies like communism and fascism, which tended to see violence as a legitimate method of political struggle. At least in the great cities, the peaceful condition of French society definitely came to an end. In Paris alone, from February 9th to June 30th, 1934, violent encounters between communists and the state authorities left eight demonstrators dead and 375 wounded policemen.\textsuperscript{77}

The generational and social composition of activists may be discerned by evaluating contemporary lists of communists and league members put under arrest. On the communist side the young members, aged between 20 and 30 years, played the most active role in direct actions. And the average age of 135 members of the \textit{Jeunesses Patriotes} who were arrested in Chartres on January 20th 1935, after serious street-fighting, was 25. Another sample of 137 activists of the \textit{Croix de feu}, apprehended in 1935/1936, averaged 29.\textsuperscript{78} These findings confirm the observations that have been made with respect to the social bases of political radicalism in other countries like Germany and Italy.\textsuperscript{79} Except for the particular case of the German \textit{Freikorps} in 1919/1920 and the Italian \textit{arditi}, it was generally not the front generation itself but the younger ones who tended toward violent action. Students, young employees and the junior, often less-qualified, workers were particularly hit by the depression in the thirties. In France, it is true, the economic crisis did not cause general mass employment comparable to the English or German situation; however, the Paris region did experience widespread unemployment in the thirties amounting to more than 10 percent. And it was the young generation, aged between 20 and 35 that suffered primarily from it.\textsuperscript{80} It was in this context that the hegemonic republicanism of the Third Republic, with its emphasis on parliamentarism, economic liberalism and individualism, lost some of its cohesion and began to be challenged by radical concepts.

On the other hand, one element has to be stressed that was unique to French political culture: the extent to which political myths and traditions were commemorated. In this context, the role political symbolism played in day-to-day politics tended to reduce the extremists’ disposition to violent action. Thus, the
numerous ceremonial days referring to historical heroes or events gave rise to important rallies and allowed a high degree of political mass mobilisation within a predetermined framework. With the political rituals of these ceremonies being clearly defined over the years, their very existence constituted, as it were, a safety valve. Very often, and by a sort of tacit consent, both sides agreed to muster their strength on the occasion of a suitable ceremonial day and helped thereby to contain uncontrolled violence.

In France, the 11th of November could therefore be elevated into a national day of celebration. As a celebration of the simple soldier, the famous poilu, armistice day depicted the unity of the nation, its dedication and willingness to make sacrifices. As such the 11th of November established a tradition that was open to all socio-political movements and was firmly planted in the center of the country’s political culture.81 For the nationalist and ‹fascist› right this became a favourite gathering-place for veterans’ associations and nationalist groupings regardless of persuasion. The annual procession up the Champs Elysées, the wreath-laying at the tomb of the unknown soldier, as well as the remembrance of the battles of the Marne and of Verdun, were high-points in the agenda of nationalist groups and were used for peaceful gatherings.82

Another striking example concerned the 14th of July, which also exerted a pacifying function in French political culture. This could be observed for example on the 14th of July, 1935, when two different mass demonstrations commemorating the fall of the Bastille were organised. Both the procession of the Popular Front, led by the communists, and the demonstration of the right-wing leagues, started in the center of Paris. But while the Popular Front went to the Place de la Bastille in the East of the capital, the right-wing leagues headed towards the Arc de Triomphe in the West. Thus, any violent clash between the formations was prevented, the historical places of Paris serving as assembling points.83 More than other countries, France relied on a number of deep-rooted national traditions that could be integrated into the ideological conceptions of radicalism, thereby curtailing their protest against the regime. Thus, the French communists managed to adapt the ‹bourgeois› tradition of July 14th for their own political identity, while the extreme right could count on the Joan d’Arc tradition or, above all, on the commemoration of the First World War.

83 See the police reports in: A.N. F7 13305.
Politische Gewalt in Frankreich und Italien nach 1918


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ABSTRACTS

These last remarks show that cultural factors have to be strongly taken into account in an analysis of violence. The undoubtedly unique French political tradition, the richness of its carefully cultivated and more or less mythologized *patrimoine*,\(^8^4\) helped in times of crisis to give historical orientation. It transcended social and political conflicts by having recourse to a cultural common ground. On the other hand, countries like Italy and, of course, Germany after 1918 lacked national traditions that could be positively or ideologically construed in the sense of a sort of ‘Whig interpretation of history’ – that is, as a linear and teleological national history of progress.\(^8^5\) There seems to be little doubt that the lack of such traditions contributed – beside other political, social and economic elements – to the fact that in those countries the common European tendency to collective ‘Sorelian’ violence was particularly strong.

84. See the collective work of Nora, *Lieux de mémoire*.
La violence politique en France et en Italie après 1918

Après 1918 les deux pays sont secoués par une vague de grèves et de protestations sociales dans lesquelles les privations au Front ainsi que les conflits sociaux dans l’industrie de guerre convergèrent avec les visions révolutionnaires bolchevistes, syndicalistes et socialistes de gauche. La classe des bourgeois et propriétaires terriens ainsi que des couches moyennes sympathisait avec le fascisme à partir de 1920. En France, au contraire, l’état s’efforcerait de prendre des mesures diverses et efficaces pour briser les vagues de grèves des années 1919 et 1920, et gagnerait ainsi un supplément de légitimité parmi les partis de droite. A partir seulement de la deuxième moitié des années 20 et surtout pendant les années 30, alors que le consensus de la guerre s’effaçait définitivement, la société française vivait une profonde polarisation et la violence politique se développa fortement. Cependant, juste pendant la crise des années 30, la culture politique spécifique de la France révélera, grâce à ses nombreux mythes et symboles politiques, sa force de pacification.