

CHAPTER 8

The Brutalization of German Politics

In the aftermath of the First World War, the Myth of the War Experience had given the conflict a new dimension as a means of national and personal regeneration. The continuation of wartime attitudes into peace furthered a certain brutalization of politics, a heightened indifference to human life. It was not only the continued visibility and high status of the military in nations like Germany which encouraged a certain ruthlessness but, above all, an attitude of mind derived from the war and the acceptance of war itself. The outcome of the process of brutalization in the inter-war years was to energize man, to propel him into action against the political enemy, or to numb men and women in the face of human cruelty and the loss of life.

England and France, the victorious nations, where the transition from war to peace had been relatively smooth, were able to keep the process of brutalization largely, if not entirely, under control. Those nations like Germany which were not so fortunate saw a new ruthlessness invade their politics. This process depended in great measure upon the strength which political extremes could muster, to what extent they determined the political debate and political action. No nation after the war could completely escape

the process of brutalization; in much of Europe crime and political militancy increased directly after the war. To many all over Europe it seemed as if the First World War had never ended but was being continued during the interwar years. The vocabulary of political battle, the desire to utterly destroy the political enemy, and the way in which these adversaries were pictured, all seemed to continue the First World War mostly against a set of different, internal foes.

The growing indifference toward mass death was a sign of this process of brutalization, though it is not easy to prove. For example, when forty-nine Jews were killed in 1903 at Kichinev, it caused an international scandal. Berlin, Paris, and London sent official protests, joined by nearly all other Western nations. But after the war, the Russian pogroms of 1919 in which some sixty thousand Jews died did not receive any particular notice, except among the Jews themselves. To be sure, the circumstances were different: in 1919 Jews were often equated with Bolsheviks, and the Allies, then engaged in their invasion of Russia, were said to have secretly supported the pogroms.¹ In this case the postwar pogroms can serve to illustrate a new ruthlessness toward putative enemies based upon stereotyping—Jews as Bolsheviks—which, as we shall see, reached a new intensity between the wars. Such differing attitudes, in 1903 and 1919, do seem to portend a certain brutalization. The Armenian massacre in which nearly a million died took place during the war itself under the guise of expelling, not exterminating, an internal foe. This massacre was also quickly forgotten, except by the Armenians themselves, and Adolf Hitler was quite correct when he was reported as saying in 1939—contemplating his own murderous plans—“Who, after all, speaks of the annihilation of the Armenians?”² Attitudes toward the death of political or so-called racial enemies will occupy us further as exemplary of the effects of brutalization; an obvious relationship exists between the confrontation with mass death and the holding of individual life as cheap.

The process of the brutalization of politics is most easily followed in Germany with its cycle of revolution and counterrevolution after the war, and the years of political uncertainty under the Weimar Republic which followed. We can examine only some of

the most important examples of this process for it penetrated most aspects of German political life. Wartime attitudes, which persisted into the postwar period, were influenced not only by civil war and revolution but also by the atmosphere in which the political discourse itself took place. During the Weimar Republic civilized political discourse was still possible; indeed, a willingness to compromise and to understand others was a prerequisite for the functioning of parliamentary government. Yet parliamentary politics were constantly challenged by extreme political factions which were apt to determine the terrain of political debate. We are concerned with the political Right as perhaps the most powerful extremist group during the Weimar Republic and the main repository of the Myth of the War Experience. Among the Right the brutalization of politics was given free rein, and even a nationalist political party like the German National Party (DNVP), which put up a respectable front in Parliament, proceeded with the same brutality against its presumed political and racial enemies through its propaganda as did the less respectable radical, ultra-nationalist *völkish* Right.³ The political Right considered itself to be the inheritor of the war experience, not just in Germany but throughout Europe, and the process of brutalization was closely linked to the spread of the Right's influence among the population. This influence proved central to German politics in the postwar years, as its agenda remained a priority which all other political groups had to take into account throughout the Weimar Republic.

Politics were increasingly viewed as a battle which must end in the enemy's unconditional surrender. To be sure, a good case could be made that during the nineteenth century a certain brutalization of politics took place quite apart from military encounters. For example, the vocabulary of class conflict showed as much disregard for human life and dignity as did wars between nations. But it was after the experience of the First World War that, in Hans Dietrich Bracher's phrase, the notion of conflict in Germany was largely transmuted into the idea of force.⁴ The change from the pre- to the postwar period was a quantitative and qualitative one, a heightening of some of the most brutal aspects of the past. The process of brutalization became dominant during the turbulent early and late phases of the Weimar Republic, determining to an

ever greater degree the political discourse, as well as the way in which the enemy was perceived. War had become a part of many people's lives, and that was bound to affect adversely the tenor of politics after the war.

War itself had been the great brutalizer, not merely through the experience of combat at the front, but also through the wartime relationships between officers and men, and among the men themselves. The strident tone of the officers, and the passivity of the men, as well as the rough-and-ready life in the squad, must have affected some soldiers. Some of what has been called the civilizing process was undone under such pressure. Significantly, many of the very men who wrote about the selfless nobility of war, and about war as an expression of man's highest ideals, enabling him to fulfill his potential, integrated war's brutality into their vision. Ernst Jünger, for example, wrote about the new race of men which the war had created, men loaded with energy, men of steel,⁵ ready for combat, giving the ideal of manliness that warrior cast which also informed many war memorials built between the wars. The integration of high ideals with war's brutality was not confined to Germany. Henri Massis in France wrote during the war itself about the mystique and sheer joy of killing.⁶

Wartime brutalization was accompanied in Germany by a longing for experiences which lay beyond the confines of contemporary civilization. This was taken to mean penetrating into a realm where only the primitive instincts held sway.⁷ War seemed to fulfill such a wish, as in Ernst Jünger's almost erotic description of a charge into the enemy trenches: "Rage squeezed bitter tears from my eyes . . . only the spell of primeval instinct remained."⁸ That this was probably written in retrospect demonstrates once more how the Myth of the War Experience satisfied men's dreams even if the reality was much different, in this case in all probability one of fear and foreboding. The popular German writer Hermann Löns, who had enlisted when he was over fifty, wrote that culture and civilization are a thin veneer underneath which nature courses, waiting for a chance to break through. Human nature became primitive, instinctual, and violent. The return to primitivism in the emotional excitement of battle was not just a German phenomenon but was noticed by Fredric Manning in England, who wrote how

in going over the top soldiers "reverted to a more primitive state of their development."⁹ (Here, however, there was no longing for the primitive as "the genuine" but merely a description of what seemed to happen.) Before the war one trend of German nationalism among others had worshiped the primitive and instinctual as the only genuine force, but during, and especially after the war, such an ideal captured the imagination of many of those who had wanted to test their manliness. This urge to discard "artificial" civilization gave a special edge to any confrontation with the enemy.

The psychiatrist Otto Binswanger wrote during the first year of the war that its course had led to a distortion of patriotic feeling: the enthusiasm and willingness to sacrifice had given way to a cruel hate and wish to utterly annihilate the enemy. The French philosopher Simone Weil, assessing the consequences of the war from a vantage point twenty years later, held that volunteers entered the war committed to the ideal of sacrifice, but ended up holding life cheap.¹⁰ Inevitably, the stark confrontation with death during the war had changed many soldiers' attitudes toward life and death. At times death was trivialized, even joked about, in order to cope with the ever-present dead. At other times it became part of the unreality of war, the fantasy life of some of the men in the trenches which Eric Leed has recently analyzed in his *No Man's Land*. There was little space for the sanctification of death at the front; that had to wait until after the war, or be left to those who had stayed at home. The cult of the war dead did not start in the trenches. For most soldiers it seems that a kind of stoicism prevailed in the end, an indifference toward death, a gradual acceptance of the inevitable. We do not, of course, know how such indifference translated into the postwar world, nor the role it might have played in accepting the brutal tone of postwar politics or, later, in acquiescing to Nazi policies. People's indifference to the fate of others, and even to their own, has many causes, but the training in indifference during the war must surely be counted as one of them.

The difference in wartime attitudes toward the death of a friend and of a foe is easier to illustrate and had a similar brutalizing effect. Such a difference became one means of mobilizing the population to oppose the enemy during the French Revolution, which

based itself upon the ideal of popular sovereignty. Hatred of the fallen enemy was encouraged by treating his death harshly, as opposed to the reverence paid to the death of those who sacrificed their lives for their country. These attitudes are illustrated by the cult of death in the French Revolution and the festivals which accompanied the funerals of the martyrs, while the burial of the enemy was made as distasteful as possible. Louis XVI and the victims of the terror were committed to a common ditch, and they received the quicklime usually reserved for the anonymous poor.¹¹ Modern nineteenth- and twentieth-century literature, which distinguished between the "passing over" of the ideal bourgeois and the nasty and sudden death of the outsider, reinforced these differing views of death. The good bourgeois (like Goethe, as one of his biographers tells it) "vanished, towards midday, at the hour of his birth," while Gustav Freytag's Veitel Itzig, the Jew, drowned in a dirty river.¹² However, the distinction between the death of a friend and that of the foe continued into the postrevolutionary age only sporadically, usually when the authorities attempted to mobilize the hate of the masses. The First World War and the post-war age made the death of the enemy a part of his general dehumanization. The enemy was the snake killed by the dragon, as we saw, or he rode down to hell with his whole army to confront the stark figure of death (Picture 19). War cemeteries and war monuments transcended the death of comrades while that of the enemy was usually final.

Eventually, the separation of enemy and friend was energetically pursued in their burial place. Before and after the war of 1870–1871 German and French soldiers occasionally shared a common grave,¹³ but during and after the First World War that was no longer the case. The mausoleum built at Douaumont to hold the bones scattered on the battlefield at Verdun was condemned by Germany because only the Tricolor flew over the fort.¹⁴ The change in attitude toward death that resulted from the war played into the hands of the German political Right: as long as they themselves were not at risk, a good many people were ready to support a ruthless war against the internal and external enemy in order to safeguard their future.



19. *The Two Destinies*. A French postcard showing the French marching toward heaven, with Christ pointing the way, and the Germans marching toward their encounter with death.

Another concept which became part of daily usage, and a fetish among the political Right, has already been identified as an important component of the Myth of the War Experience. The *Man-nesideal*—the ideal of manliness—had fascinated many German political and social groups ever since the Wars of Liberation. The First World War gave a new edge to this ideal, as the warrior became the paradigm of manliness. "We have become a wrathful people / committed to the waging of war / as a bloodied and enraged knighthood of men / we have sworn with our blood to attain victory."¹⁵ Arnold Zweig, the writer, put it well in 1925: "The war here, there and everywhere has brought us an upsurge of public and private male-manliness."¹⁶ He lamented such manliness as a return to barbarism. That is not how most Germans perceived

this ideal, exemplified on their war monuments by statues in aggressive postures.

War was an invitation to manliness not only in Germany; in England Christopher Isherwood held that young men after the war had to face the question, "Are you really a man?"¹⁷ The feeling that war had created a new masculine type existed all over Europe. It was a feeling which stimulated the search for such a new man among Fascists and Communists after the war. This man would be free of the dead-weight of a middle-class past just as the front-line soldier—the idealized figure in the Fritz Erler wartime poster (see Picture 14, p. 134)—had left that past behind him. Schiller's assertion that only the soldier is free, a notion that stood at the beginning of the history of volunteers, now received an anticapitalist twist, indeed one opposed to a supposedly shallow modernity.

While the stereotype of manliness was strengthened by the war in both England and Germany, it seems that in Germany the image of manliness during the war was perhaps most often associated with the death of the enemy. Thus Lieutenant Ernst Wurche, symbolizing the ideal German youth in Flex's *The Wanderer Between Two Worlds*—described in all his manly beauty—wants to become a storm trooper in order to experience what he calls the beauty of battle. As he admires his sword this pure and chaste youth has "war in his blood"—to paraphrase Ernst Jünger's description of the ideal German warrior.¹⁸ The verses which introduce a play about the battle of Langemarck spring to mind: "A naked sword grows out of my hand, / the earnestness of the hour flows through me hard as steel. / Here I stand all alone, proud and tall, / Intoxicated that I have now become a man."¹⁹

The organic unity of flesh and sword ready to kill, the hardness of steel as a part of one's manhood, provides an excellent example of the warrior image which was an integral part of the Myth of the War Experience. The primitive as the genuine also helped to form this ideal type, disciplined and directed toward achieving victory, not just in war but in all aspects of life. The instincts held sway, giving the warrior his energy and his ruthlessness. Modern humanism, to cite Ernst Jünger once again, is a dream without contours, one that does not know either good or evil, the boring dream of a passenger riding a tramway at three o'clock in the

afternoon. According to a pre-Nazi book about German youth, "Only military valour keeps a people young and manly."²⁰

Decisiveness was at the very core of this definition of manliness, symbolized by many statues on war memorials. The genuine as the primitive was not supposed to mean chaos—to energize the warrior ideal it had to inspire clarity and decisiveness during battle. It is of some importance in this connection that inscriptions on German war memorials no longer merely proclaimed victory, as, for example, after the Franco-Prussian War, but instead glorified the very will to do battle as the highest good. This was the lesson which youth was supposed to pass on to future generations.²¹

The ideal of camaraderie had provided many soldiers with the noblest expression of their manliness. It seemed to approximate that *fin-de-siècle* longing for a community of affinity which had been so strongly opposed to the artificiality of bourgeois life. This ideal before and during the war centered upon comradeship based upon equal status and charismatic leadership. Thus the German Youth Movement had been preoccupied with the perfection of its own community rather than with the outside world. Though this ideal was rarely perfect in the trenches, it became some sort of a reality as each man had to depend upon the other members of his squad for survival. After the war, the ideal of comradeship became one of the most important ingredients of the Myth of the War Experience, a political force which for many a veteran recaptured something of the original ideal. Wartime camaraderie promised a social arrangement which, if transferred to peacetime Germany, would liquidate a corrupt republic based upon class struggle and divisive political parties. The German *Volk* should be seen as a group of comrades, reinvigorated by the "new men" who had come back from the front—equal in status but not in function under strong and unquestioned leadership.²²

The camaraderie of a *Männerbund* would assure a new and powerful nation, and it was this wartime ideal which was adopted by the radical Right. Camaraderie, which before and even during the war had been turned inward, upon the relationship between comrades, now turned outward to be used as a weapon against all those who threatened the rebirth of a militant nation. Even during the later stages of the war some observers had noted a change in

the ideal of camaraderie: it was becoming more selfish, less devoted to shared ideals than to the survival of its members and their eventual triumph over their enemies.²³

The Free Corps came to symbolize the continuation of wartime camaraderie in peacetime. They were officers and men who continued to fight between 1919 and 1921, though the war had ended, and many of them were not veterans but were recruited at school. They attempted to crush revolution at home, to drive the Bolsheviks from the Baltic states, and to defend Upper Silesia against the Poles. Officers recruited the men directly, just as the Free Corps had been recruited in the German Wars of Liberation. A powerful myth grew up around the members of the Free Corps as real men who in their camaraderie exemplified the best of the nation. They continued wartime traditions, opposed to the Germany which had accepted the humiliating treaty of peace. Ernst von Salomon, a former member who in his books busily manufactured this myth, saw in the Free Corps "new men" like himself: "We were cut off from the world of bourgeois norms . . . the bonds were broken and we were freed. . . . We were a band of fighters drunk with all the passion of the world; full of lust, exultant in action."²⁴

It was true that the Free Corps fought in the Baltic and in Silesia without the overt approval of the government, but the young Republic itself used the Free Corps in order to help put down revolutions in Berlin and Munich. Moreover, they were supported by the German army, the *Reichswehr*, especially during their defense of Germany's eastern border.²⁵ These, then, were hardly the abandoned bands of comrades of their myth. There were actually many different Free Corps, such as the Free Corps Rossbach or the Free Corps Ehrhardt (named after their leaders), and a rapid turnover of men, whereas the legend treats them as one unit and takes for its standard the most nationalistic Free Corps with the most spectacular leadership. Yet, as always, myth and reality are interwoven in the writings of some of these men, and it was they who would determine the image of the Free Corps in the German mind. The myth created around these troops exemplified the changing thrust of the ideal of comradeship after the war.

This "lost troupe" (*verlorene Haufen*), as Ernst von Salomon called them,²⁶ was said to be held together not by ideas but through

action. Thus one member of the most famed of the Free Corps, the Brigade Ehrhardt, wrote retrospectively in 1927, "We adopted activism as a moral principle . . . we ask understanding for activism as such . . . of the moral worth of the deed which scorns freedom and death."²⁷ There was no doubt a ruthlessness, a feeling of desperation, about some of these men who were unable to formulate effective political goals and who rightly or wrongly thought themselves abandoned by the nation whose cause they championed. The suppression of revolution in Berlin or Munich was accompanied by brutal murders, and such murders continued even after the Free Corps had been disbanded, most often committed by former members of the corps.

Thus Ernst von Salomon provided the car used in the 1922 assassination of Walter Rathenau, Germany's foreign minister, a charismatic figure and a Jew, while Salomon's former comrades fired the shots. When the Nazis came to power they constructed a new tomb for Rathenau's murderers and crowned it with reproductions of the steel helmets which had been worn by soldiers during the First World War. These young assassins, two of whom died as they were being hunted down after the murder, became part of the cult of the war dead. The ideal of camaraderie itself was brutalized through the Right's use of it as an instrument of aggression. One of the sayings which could be framed and hung in one's living room during the Nazi period ran: "The ideal above us, the comrade beside us, the enemy in front of us." While manliness and camaraderie had always been thought of as identical, within rightist groups the warrior concept of manliness triumphed during and after the war as a prerequisite for true comradeship.

The distinction made during war between the death of an enemy and that of a comrade was ready-made for the political battles of peacetime. The supposedly respectable right-wing German National Party distinguished sharply between different political assassinations: their enemies were "killed" ("*getötet*") but their supporters were "murdered" ("*ein Mordfall wurde begangen*"). The 324 political assassinations committed by the political Right between 1919 and 1923 (as against twenty-two committed by the extreme Left) were, for the most part, executed by former soldiers at the command of their one-time officers—by actual or former

troops of the Free Corps or members of rightist paramilitary organizations (most were members of both)—and defended in patriotic language borrowed from the war.²⁸ Such murders took on all the aspects of wartime action fought during a corrupt peace. General von Seeckt, by then retired as peacetime commander-in-chief of the *Reichswehr*, wrote in 1928 that he could understand full well if members of the Free Corps Rossbach, which had committed a great many murders, considered themselves patriotic soldiers. General Franz Ritter von Epp (himself a former Free Corps leader) told a committee of the *Reichstag* that those killed for betraying illegal arms hidden by the Free Corps deserved no better fate than those who had committed treason against the fatherland.²⁹ Typically enough, a new word, coined by the political Right, was applied to this kind of murder. It was called *schädlingmord*, meaning the justified death of one who undermines the nation, the execution of a noxious person.³⁰ We shall see later how language was important as an instrument of brutalization.

Accepted norms of morality and behavior seemed threatened in Germany, but not in Germany only. This was in part a consequence of the transition from war to peace which proved difficult for many a veteran. The sober guide for returning veterans that was published by the German Republic in 1918 stated that veterans had been “completely alienated from bourgeois existence” and had lost contact with the “necessities of life,”³¹ the norms of settled society. Already during the war officials had felt that life at the front might get out of hand, that it had to be brought into line with the accepted norms of morality and behavior.

After demobilization, criminal statistics in Germany showed a sudden increase in capital crimes committed by men with no previous criminal record. One contemporary criminologist attributed the rise to the readiness to take life during the war and the hopeless social and economic situation of the times.³² Certainly, such an analysis rings true. Arnold Zweig in his novel *Pont und Anna* (1925), for example, has Pont commit a brutal murder; the crime was applauded by the Right and explained by Zweig as a consequence of the war and of the continued warlike atmosphere in postwar Germany. Though the murder was committed during a rape, Pont as a former officer and member of the Free Corps re-

ceived a mild sentence. The ending of the novel accurately reflected a large part of the judicial situation in postwar Germany.

The legal barriers against taking a life were weakened by the Republic itself through the leniency of its judicial system toward so-called patriotic acts of violence. Such weakening was not related to the use of presidential emergency powers under article 48 of the Weimar Constitution—powers which were eventually used to end the Republic. Instead, the weakening of legal barriers against the politically inspired use of force occurred as part of the normal operation of the established judiciary. For instance, the German Supreme Court (the *Reichsgericht*) ruled immediately after the war that a “supralegal” emergency could exist which would exempt murder from the full weight of the law, and gave as an example the murders committed by the Free Corps in their struggle against the Poles in Upper Silesia. The court later drew back,³³ but a precedent had been set.

The most telling illustration of how under the Republic the law itself collaborated to cheapen individual life is the amnesty granted by the president of the Republic. During the first years of the Republic crimes against individual life had, by and large, been excluded from consideration for such amnesty. However, in 1928 life imprisonment and the death sentence for politically motivated murders were commuted to seven to twenty-three years in prison. Yet this was not good enough for the political parties of the Right and the Communists, who demanded complete amnesty for political assassins, and by 1930 all other parties, except the Social Democrats, had joined in this demand. The state of civil war after 1918 was legitimized when in 1930 all those who had committed political murders before 1924 (when most of the assassinations took place) were pardoned, provided that the victims were not heads of parliamentary parties or members of the present government.³⁴ Among those who left prison in 1930 was Ernst Werner Techow, the single survivor of those who had participated in the murder of Walter Rathenau (in fact, Techow had already benefited by a reduction of his earlier sentence).³⁵ Thus the Republic itself prepared the way for the amnesty proclaimed in 1933, immediately after the Nazis seized power, pardoning all National Socialists who had in any way fallen afoul of the law during the struggle for power.

The virtual abdication of law in the face of the *Fehmemörder*—that is, those who murdered men thought to have betrayed right-wing paramilitary groups—legitimized violence, in spite of the fact that after the Rathenau murder in 1922, the Republic passed a law which contained tough sanctions for those who were thought to endanger the life of its leaders or of the Republic itself. This law was never impartially or indeed strictly enforced, and when it had to be renewed in 1929 it was defeated by a coalition of diverse political parties. There seemed to be a broad consensus that it was not the Weimar Constitution but the German state whose authority should be protected. This focus upon the state itself rather than upon parliamentary democracy is exemplified by the presidential emergency decrees, under article 48 of the Constitution through which Germany was governed without Parliament from 1930 to 1933. The decrees upholding law and order were called “Decrees to secure the authority of the State,” and the Republic was no longer mentioned as it had been in the law of 1922.³⁶ The brutalization of politics had worked its way within the Republican system and was not merely imposed by those who would destroy it.

The dehumanization of the enemy was one of the most fateful consequences of this process of brutalization. Stereotypes spread by word and picture were perhaps the most effective means toward this end. Once more, such stereotypes had circulated since the eighteenth century, but the war prepared peoples' minds more thoroughly for their reception. Atrocity stories became a staple during the war, used by all sides in the conflict. No holds were barred, and social as well as sexual taboos which previously had played a role in restraining the iconography of some stereotypes were now discarded. The use of brutal force was part of this stereotyping: the enemy massacred, mutilated, and tortured the defenseless. He also subverted supposedly sacred values. Thus the French accused the Germans of using the bodies of fallen soldiers to produce glycerine needed for armaments. Scatological themes were common as the enemy was accused of every kind of usually forbidden sexual act.³⁷ The effectiveness of such stereotypes was greatly enhanced by the ample use of visual material; illustrations were always more effective than the printed word in reaching the population.

The nineteenth century had become an increasingly visual age as the largely illiterate masses were integrated into society and politics. The First World War was a war in the age of the picture postcard, which could show sketches or staged pictures that normally would have been banned as pornographic or too cruel for family use. Illustrated newspapers, which ran photographs and sketches of military action, found a mass public during the war as well. Atrocity propaganda, if not quite so dramatic, also appeared in the more respectable press. Advertising was also enlisted, as we saw in the example of the French department store ad showing native children stomping on a stuffed figure in German uniform (see Picture 16, p. 138).

Immediately after the war, Ferdinand Avenarius, a German art critic and publicist, condemned what he saw as the perversion of pictures in wartime; he wrote that while in peacetime caricature was a form of representation, in wartime its effect was hypnotic. He singled out as examples anti-German caricatures, picture postcards which showed scenes of sadism, rape, and pederasty.³⁸ Such scenes were also used by Germans against their enemies, and the projection upon the enemy of actions which defied all social conventions must have been both frightening and perhaps titillating as well.

Hatred of the enemy had been expressed in poetry and prose ever since the beginning of modern warfare in the age of the French Revolution. All male citizens were now engaged in war and had either to be motivated or to rationalize their participation and risk of life. But as a rule such questions as “Why do we hate the French?”—asked, for example, by Prussians during the German Wars of Liberation in 1813—were answered in a manner which focused upon the present war and did not cast aspersions upon French history or traditions, or indeed upon the entire French nation. Moreover, a patriotic journal like *Das Neue Deutschland* (*The New Germany*), even while lamenting the supposed inhumanity of French soldiers as an occupation force in 1813–1814, blamed Napoleon himself and not the French people for Germany's oppression.³⁹ To be sure, at times, propagandists for the national cause like Ernst Moritz Arndt did impugn all of the French, but this was the exception rather than the rule, and even Arndt be-

lieved in the humanistic ideals of the Enlightenment.⁴⁰ During the First World War, in contrast, inspired by a sense of universal mission, each side dehumanized the enemy and called for his unconditional surrender. Germany was now regarded by a good many of its wartime leaders as a nation whose destiny it was to regenerate the world (*Am Deutschen Wesen wird die Welt genesen*).⁴¹

The enemy was transformed into the anti-type, symbolizing the reversal of all the values which society held dear. The stereotyping was identical to that of those who differed from the norms of society and seemed to menace its very existence: Jews, Gypsies, and sexual deviants. The First World War built upon the anti-Semitism and racism that had developed during the nineteenth century and upon the urge toward ever-greater social and sexual conformity which had not yet peaked during the earlier wars.

Postwar Germany was not alone in dehumanizing the putative enemy in a manner which would not have been so readily accepted before the war. England also underwent such a process of brutalization, even if the more courteous and respectful prewar political discourse remained intact. For example, the Bulldog Drummond stories written by Sapper (Herman Cyril McNeile) were among the greatest publishing successes of the interwar years. Drummond murders and tortures England's enemies without compunction or mercy, while Saki (Hector Hugh Munro), another extremely popular writer, has his characters—though slightly more respectable than Drummond—brutalize the scruffy and dirty enemy, mostly Jews or Bolsheviks. These two writers are merely some of the most prominent who after the war advocated an aggressive masculinity in order to protect British virtue and strength. Yet, as Leslie Susser has shown, British fascism declined partly because its leader, Sir Oswald Mosley, broke the established political code with his use of strong-arm tactics.⁴² E. M. Foster got it right when he wrote, "It is something that in England dictatorship is still supposed to be ungentlemanly, the massacre of Jews in bad form, and private armies figures of fun."⁴³ In postwar Germany the process of brutalization successfully penetrated all of political life.

War was a powerful engine for the enforcement of conformity, a fact which strengthened the stereotype not only of the foreign enemy, but also of those within the borders who were regarded as a

threat to the stability of the nation and who disturbed the image society liked to have of itself. A study of the city of Marburg has shown how after the war people felt an increased need for a cohesive society. The middle class displayed a new enthusiasm for well-organized social and political associations,⁴⁴ and it was readier than before to support mass organizations as well. Whether or not Marburg was representative, the offensive waged against the Jews during and after the war seems to demonstrate the desire for an ever greater conformity, legitimized in part by the sharp distinction made between society and its putative enemies. The discrimination against the Jews entered an ominous phase in Germany during the war. Such discrimination might have been expected to occur in France, which up to that point had a more militant anti-Semitic past than Germany. But France's racist-oriented political Right held its peace during the war, while in Germany the Right seized the chance to push its cause, encouraged by the wave of nationalism and the growing frustration with the course of the conflict. Moreover, anti-Jewish action took place in Germany rather than among the Allies, which had managed to keep and even improve wartime living standards, because the standard of living declined drastically in Germany. Such a decline fueled social tensions which helped to make overt much of the latent anti-Semitism that had always been present. Yet anti-Semitism had also been a part of British anti-Prussian propaganda.⁴⁵

At the beginning of the war Emperor Willam II had proclaimed that all differences between classes and religions had vanished, that he knew only Germans. But already by 1915 there were fewer Jewish officers in the army than at the beginning of the war. More sensational action followed when on October 11, 1916, the Imperial War Minister ordered statistics to be compiled to find out how many Jews served at the front, how many served behind the front, and how many did not serve at all. What this meant for young Jews fighting side by side with their comrades in the trenches may well be imagined. This so-called Jew count was the result of anti-Semitic agitation which had begun in earnest a year earlier, and as the results of the count were never published, the suspicion that Jews were shirkers remained.⁴⁶

The count of Jewish soldiers was only the prelude to a more sys-

tematic exclusion of Jews from important social and political groups after the war. These ranged from student fraternities to veterans organizations; indeed, most self-conscious *Männerbünde*—the wave of the future, according to the political Right—were now closed to Jews. At the same time that the number of Jews fighting on and behind the front was being counted, a debate about the admission of Jews erupted in the German Youth Movement, loosening, in the midst of war, restraints which had previously kept this issue in the background. However, in this debate pro- as well as anti-Jewish voices were heard, and the number of Jews who joined the German Youth Movement actually grew considerably during the war.⁴⁷

The "Jew count" was not racially motivated; the Jews to be counted were defined as members of a religious community,⁴⁸ and even among many anti-Semites nationalism and racism were not identical. Nevertheless, influential rightist organizations like the Pan German League imported their prewar racism into the war. Their call for the annexation of enemy territory was accompanied by the demand that German Jews be sent to Palestine. Many other smaller rightist organizations kept racist ideas alive as part of their political program. After the war had ended, racism surged to the fore: the attacks upon the Jews, their exclusion from social and political organizations, were now justified on racial grounds. Whereas earlier some Jews who were thought to look and behave in a so-called Germanic manner had been admitted into several *völkisch* nationalist organizations, now Jews were banned without exception. Not only did the social organizations we have mentioned follow this course, but by 1929 the German National Party, a member of many Weimar coalition governments, had officially closed its doors to Jewish membership. Racism was no bar to respectability among those well-to-do Germans who looked with contempt upon the proletarian Nazi Party. The exclusion of Jews from the *Stahlhelm*, the German veterans organization, was unique; no other national veterans organization in Western or Central Europe discriminated against their former comrades. National Socialism eventually brought this trend to its logical, if not inevitable, conclusion, when a decree issued in 1935 forbade the inclusion of the names of fallen Jewish soldiers on war monuments.⁴⁹

The renewed popularity of conspiracy theories played a leading

part in postwar anti-Semitism and racism, confirming, so it seemed, the circle of vice which threatened to strangle the nation. The golden age of such theories had been the last two decades of the nineteenth century, when the Catholic Church had proclaimed its belief in a conspiracy of Jews and Freemasons, while in France *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, an account of the supposed Jewish world conspiracy, was forged with the help of the secret Russian police. During the war conspiracy theories fed wartime propaganda. The British, as we just mentioned, wrote about the alliance between Prussianism and Jewry. But it was the Bolshevik Revolution which seemed to reveal the "hidden hand of Jewry" to most nations: used also as wartime propaganda, it prepared the ground for the uncritical reception of *The Protocols* in Germany and in England—countries not previously influenced by *The Protocols'* lies.⁵⁰

The surge of postwar racism, however, was largely a reaction against those social, economic, and political crises which in Germany accompanied the transition from war to peace. But it was at the same time an obvious symptom of the process of brutalization caused by the war. Wartime camaraderie, as we saw, had assumed an aggressive posture after the war, not only directed against Poles and domestic revolutionaries but also excluding the so-called racial enemy from the comradeship of German veterans organizations. Wartime comradeship did not refute the attack on Jews as citizens and as men in accordance with the long-standing stereotype of the Jew as cowardly, devious, and devoid of physical beauty. The flyers circulated by the German National Party did not differ from those of the Nazis in this respect.⁵¹ The exclusion of Jews from many significant social organizations and *Männerbünde* demonstrated the dominance of myth over reality once again, and not all the Iron Crosses won by Jews during the war, or the camaraderie of the trenches, could change that fact.

This upsurge of racism was accompanied by an escalating violence of language and visual representation, again reflecting the process of brutalization which is our concern. Posters showing Jewish stereotypes with a so-called criminal physiognomy were the order of the day. Such stereotyping was not confined to the Right, though they made the most use of it. The Nazis' "Jews Look

at You" ("Juden sehen dich an") was matched on the Left by Kurt Tucholski's "Generals Look at You." Though the cause was different, and militarism a real threat to the Republic, the use of dehumanizing stereotypes by both Left and Right once more points to a brutalization of politics. Tucholski dedicated a sketch of what he called a German face—a thickset face with a low forehead ("gedrungener Kopf keine allzu hohe Stirn")—to Georg Grosz, "who taught us to see such a face" a dedication he meant literally. During the war itself a quite different kind of "German face" had been painted by Fritz Erler, who wrote that anyone who has seen this face—with its steel helmet and luminous eyes—would never forget it, while Ernst Jünger, describing the faces, eyes, and bodies of his storm troopers, proclaimed a new race of men.⁵²

Such new men also spoke a new language, one which sharpened traditional modes of expression and integrated them into a Manichaeic world picture of enemy and friend. During earlier wars some restraint had been shown in the language applied to the enemy, though even then it was wearing thin. But during and especially after the First World War, all barriers fell. Thus the word *schädling* (noxious) was transferred from weeds to humans in *schädlingismord*, the word used by the nationalist Right to justify their political murders.⁵³ The word *untermensch* (subhuman) was found occasionally before the war, but it was afterward that the term was applied to those who refused to conform to the dictates of the radical Right. In addition, the word *fanatic*, which had a negative connotation earlier, was now used as an adjective to signify heroism and the willingness to fight.⁵⁴ The word *heroic* became common coinage together with *kämpferisch*, that "fighting spirit" which too often replaced rational debate or the willingness to compromise. Another phrase anchored in a law of 1837 was given new life: "executed in flight." The execution of prisoners trying to escape was originally defined as legal only if there had been systematic transgressions and the prisoner had made long and consistent preparations to escape. Now prisoners were executed without the court inquiring closely into whether such a flight had indeed occurred. During the Republic the police itself used this pretext to shoot twenty-nine workers after a brawl. But Karl Liebknecht, the Socialist, was also said to have been shot in flight by the Free Corps

commando which perpetrated the murder. The use which the Nazis made of this law is well known.⁵⁵

The mechanization of all aspects of life, greatly accelerated by the war, also left an imprint upon language. Thus the dehumanizing phrase "human material," still denounced before the war as denying the human spirit,⁵⁶ became an accepted part of the general vocabulary during and after the war. Such a phrase encouraged that abstraction which was the core of depersonalization. For Hitler the Jew was a "principle" and this language of depersonalization, in turn, must be put into the context of stereotypes. After the war the sharp distinction between enemy and friend, involving all levels of human perception, encouraged the homogenization of men and women into a coherent mass.

The use of descriptive adjectives to characterize men and movements which seemed to menace society and the nation completed the process of depersonalization for those regarded with suspicion and hate. The political Right attached words like *Jewish* and *Bolshevik* to all of their internal enemies and to all the movements and people they despised. They lived in constant fear of "Jewish" or "Bolshevik" plots, which more often than not, they asserted, were combined in a Jewish-Bolshevik conspiracy. Such descriptive adjectives had the same effect as the use of slogans, crucial to mass politics. This homogenization of a group of the population once again points to the Manichaeic cast of mind which craved the clear and unambiguous wartime distinctions between friend and foe.

The political Right after the war saw no difference between virtue and vice in the instruments it used to attain power; for most of its members the war had not ended, and victory might yet be within reach. The future head of the National Socialist organization of disabled veterans wrote in 1918: "The war against the German people continues. The World War was only its bloody beginning."⁵⁷ The idea of permanent war, an integral part of the ideology of the radical Right, was encouraged by the belief that the Treaty of Versailles had been no treaty of peace but a challenge to continue the struggle. The absence of a generally accepted peace treaty after 1918, something taken for granted earlier, was certainly one factor which facilitated the incorporation of war into

people's lives. And, of course, after the Second World War no peace treaty was even attempted. The implications of the devaluation of such treaties for perceptions of war and peace still need to be investigated, but it seems to have played some part in the process of brutalization after the First World War, even if this is difficult to define.

However, the goal of the radical Right was not to wage permanent war; this was merely a means used to accomplish their political and ideological ends. Nor was racism a weapon directed solely against blacks or Jews—but an ideology as fully formed as liberalism, conservatism, or socialism, standing on its own feet with its own positive appeal. Seeing only the negative aspects of such movements is to greatly underestimate their force, a mistake common before and after the Nazis' seizure of power. Instead, we must regard the political Right as based in large part on an interplay between the brutality encouraged by the war, with its aggressive camaraderie and manliness, and the ideals which seemed to promise a better future for all Germans. The political methods and attitudes of the Right were well designed to take advantage of the age of mass politics: the nationalization of the masses was the work of movements which possessed a proper dynamic and which used the appeal to myth and symbols to the best effect. Those factors we have discussed as part of the process of brutalization linked to the war were part of a new age of mass politics whose demands were better understood by the Right than the Left, while the Republic had great difficulty integrating the masses into its system of government. That the war itself led to a democratization of politics was vital for the new dominance that mass politics achieved over other modes of political expression.

The war did not create the forces which it unleashed; it gave them a new edge and dynamic and helped them to victory. The aggressiveness of the political Right in 1914 was perhaps not so different from that of 1918, and yet after the war we confront a new brutality of expression and action, a lesser regard for respectability, and a greater urge to attain victory at all costs. Racism came to the fore, as we have noted, encouraging this aggressiveness in its rejection of all compromise. At the same time that the political Right became ever more brutalized it broke out of its political

ghetto, and long before its seizure of power determined the terrain of political debate during the Weimar Republic.

We have concentrated upon the political Right, but it is equally important to determine the impact of the process of brutalization upon the whole tenor of life after the war. People must have become accustomed not only to wartime brutality but also to a certain level of visual and verbal violence. The community of reason during the Weimar Republic was always faced by movements which reflected the chaos of the times through a heightened aggressiveness. The brutalization of politics had informed the political Right during the Weimar Republic, and with the Nazis' seizure of power it entered the official politics of the Third Reich.

The Myth of the War Experience was central to the process of brutalization because it had transformed the memory of war and made it acceptable, providing nationalism with some of its most effective postwar myths and symbols. The Myth of the War Experience also attempted to carry the First into the Second World War, to establish an unbroken continuity which would rejuvenate the nation. But for all that, there was almost no enthusiasm for war in 1939, no new generation of 1914, in spite of the Nazis' efforts to produce one. Nevertheless, the attitudes toward politics, life, and death which the myth projected prepared many people to accept the inevitability of war. To a great extent the interwar period built on war, and no effective pacifist movement was able to take its place beside the Myth of the War Experience.