

# **‘Milksops’ and ‘Bemedalled Old Men’**

**War Veterans and the War Youth Generation in the Weimar  
Republic**

Kristian Mennen

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## Abstract

This article reconsiders traditional assumptions about the connection between the First World War and the rise of National Socialism in Germany, according to which politically radicalised war veterans joined the *Freikorps* after the war and formed the backbone of the Nazi membership and electorate. In questioning this view, the article first traces the political paths of actual veterans' organisations. Whereas the largest veterans' organisations were not politically active, the most distinctive ones – *Reichsbanner* and *Stahlhelm* – were not primarily responsible for a 'brutalisation' or radicalisation of Weimar political culture. Their definitions of 'veteran' and 'front experience' implicitly excluded the so-called 'war youth generation' from their narrative. Secondly, it is shown how representatives of this younger generation, lacking actual combat experience but moulded by war propaganda, determined the collective imagination of the First World War. The direct connection between the First World War and National Socialism can therefore primarily be found in the continuity of public and cultural imagination of war and of 'war veterans', and much less so in actual membership overlaps between veterans' and Nazi movements.<sup>1</sup>

**Keywords:** Germany; National Socialism; veterans; generations; political culture  
In this article, the connection between the First World War veterans and the rise of National Socialism in Germany will be scrutinised on the basis of recent historiography and insights in political culture. Contrary to common assumptions and approaches, according to which disappointed and politically radicalised war veterans formed the backbone of the Nazi membership and electorate, political activity of the actual veterans' organisations must be distinguished from the narratives and collective memory put forward by the 'war youth generation'. It will be argued that the direct connection between the First World War and National Socialism can primarily be found in the continuity of public and cultural imagination of war and of 'war veterans' by representatives of the 'war youth generation', and much less so in actual membership overlaps between veterans' and Nazi movements.

According to traditional assumptions in German historiography and the historiography of National Socialism in general, the experiences of German soldiers in the First World War, the revolutionary events and political instability after 1918, and the rise of the *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* [NSDAP; National Socialist German Workers' Party] are directly linked to each other. Although Adolf Hitler's takeover of power in 1933 is no longer viewed as a logical consequence of political and cultural tendencies in German history since the nineteenth century and the authoritarian, undemocratic society structures of the German Empire (the *Sonderweg* thesis), the effects and consequences of the First World War are still taken into account as a major factor. Millions of German men served in the war. It was assumed that after the armistice of 1918, many of them encountered severe problems in reintegrating into society. By claiming that the German army had never been defeated in the field, but was 'stabbed

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<sup>1</sup> 'Schwarz-Rot-Gold marschiert!' *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 13 August 1927, 3. Beilage: 1.

in the back'<sup>2</sup> by democratic politicians and Socialist revolutionaries, right-wing propaganda allegedly turned many war veterans against the democratic system of the Weimar Republic. 'Disappointed' and 'brutalised' veterans were thought to have been 'confused, embittered, angry, hungry, and with no hope of pursuing military careers because of the limitations placed on the German army by the Treaty of Versailles'.<sup>3</sup> It was assumed that they had joined the *Freikorps* [free corps] in the period 1919 to 1923, thereby extending war methods and rhetoric into peacetime. Moreover, war veterans were supposed to have formed the core of the NSDAP leadership and the backbone of the Nazi constituency after 1930.

The level of political culture in the Weimar Republic presents another, more indirect and more plausible connection between war veterans and the rise of National Socialism. Resentment against parliamentary politics, which seemed unable to produce majority coalitions and solutions for urgent political and socio-economic problems, a general rejection of the Versailles peace treaty, and the insistence that Germany or the German army should not be held responsible for the outbreak of the war and the defeat in 1918, were the main ingredients of a 'culture of defeat'. A militarisation of politics and of political language, the description of political adversaries as 'enemies' or 'traitors', and the illusion that violence was a viable solution for political problems, characterised the polarised political conflicts in the Weimar Republic. The poisoned political culture and the unresolved legacy of the First World War do account for parts of the explanation for the rise of National Socialism.<sup>4</sup> However, common assumptions that 'veterans had been "completely alienated from bourgeois existence" and had lost contact with the "necessities of life," the norms of settled society',<sup>5</sup> and that frustrated veterans formed

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<sup>2</sup> Boris Barth, *Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration: Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914–1933* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 2003); Ulrich Heinemann, *Die verdrängte Niederlage: Politische Öffentlichkeit und Kriegsschuldfrage in der Weimarer Republik* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1983).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Wohl, *The Generation of 1914* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 54.

<sup>4</sup> Richard Bessel, 'Militarismus im innenpolitischen Leben der Weimarer Republik: Von den Freikorps zur sa,' in *Militär und Militarismus in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Klaus-Jürgen Müller and Eckardt Opitz (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1978), 193–222; James M. Diehl, *Paramilitary Politics in Weimar Germany* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977); Richard J. Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich* (New York: Allen Lane, 2003), 58–76; Patrick Krassnitzer, 'Die Geburt des Nationalsozialismus im Schützengraben: Formen der Brutalisierung in den Autobiographien von nationalsozialistischen Frontsoldaten,' in *Der verlorene Frieden: Politik und Kriegskultur nach 1918*, ed. Jost Dülffer and Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2002), 119–148; Gerd Krumeich, ed., *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2010); Benjamin Ziemann, 'Das "Fronterlebnis" des Ersten Weltkriegs – eine sozialhistorische Zäsur? Deutungen und Wirkungen in Deutschland und Frankreich,' in *Der Erste Weltkrieg und die europäische Nachkriegsordnung: Sozialer Wandel und Formveränderung der Politik*, ed. Hans Mommsen (Cologne: Böhlau, 2000), 43–82, here: 43–49.

<sup>5</sup> George Lachmann Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers: Reshaping the Memory of the Two World Wars* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 170. Part of the literature about the Weimar Republic and the interwar period concurs with this view and directly blames the *Stahlhelm* and the *Reichsbanner* for contributing to the militarisation of political culture in the Weimar Republic and to an environment in which the rise of National Socialism became possible. Cf. Ursula Büttner, *Weimar: Die überforderte*

the backbone of the National Socialist party, are not supported by recent historical research and must therefore be dismissed.

In order to review the connection between veterans, veterans' organisations, and the rise of National Socialism on the level of direct, personal involvement, the first part of this contribution will look into the actual activities of First World War veterans in Germany in the interwar period and their involvement in political affairs. The main focus of the analysis consists of a review of the veterans' organisations *Stahlhelm* and *Reichsbanner*, which were often referred to in the context of the militarised political culture of the Weimar Republic and its eventual failure. These organisations presented themselves and central topics such as 'war veteran', 'front spirit' or 'front community' in ideology and in public space, and instrumentalised these concepts for political goals and methods. The staging of the *Stahlhelm* and the *Reichsbanner* as representatives of the war generation and the front veterans will be analysed with explicit reference to the rise of National Socialism. The veterans' organisations collaborated on the basis of shared interests and actively confronted accusations from the *Sturmabteilung* [sa; Storm Detachment] or other organisations of not representing the 'true' 'front spirit' or the 'legacy of 1914'.

Although the scope of this article does not allow for a complete discursive analysis of the problem of 'war veterans' and the ideological controversy about the war's political and moral implications, its contribution consists of providing insights on the level of political culture. The controversies in and among competing German veterans' organisations about their mutual perceptions and their repertoire in public space reveal some of the basic notions and standards of political activity and public appearance of veterans' organisations. This part of the article is largely based on existing historiography about German veterans' organisations and political culture in the Weimar Republic. It will, however, present a new synthesis and interpretation of this material, and provide the important addition of the discursive conflict in commemorative and political culture about the representation of the 'front veteran' and 'front experience'.

Since this account of the history of German veterans' organisations does in itself not contribute to an enhanced understanding of the rise of National Socialism or provide indications for a strong involvement of veterans therein, the second part of this article will approach the question from a different angle. This second part will first review the composition of the Nazi and sa membership with a view to generational affiliation.

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*Republik 1918–1933* (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 2008), 184–185; Evans, *The Coming of the Third Reich*, 70–74, 268–270; Krassnitzer, 'Die Geburt des Nationalsozialismus'; Hans-Joachim Mauch, *Nationalistische Wehrorganisationen in der Weimarer Republik: Zur Entwicklung und Ideologie des 'Paramilitarismus'* (Frankfurt/Bern: Lang, 1982); Hans Mommsen, 'Militär und zivile Militarisierung in Deutschland 1914–1938,' in *Militär und Gesellschaft im 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ute Frevert (Stuttgart: Klett-Cotta, 1997), 265–276; Karl Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte und Struktur der politischen Kampfverbände zur Zeit der Weimarer Republik* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966), 110–125; Bernd Weisbrod, 'Gewalt in der Politik: Zur politischen Kultur in Deutschland zwischen den beiden Weltkriegen,' *Geschichte in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* 43 (1992): 391–404; Eric D. Weitz, *Weimar Germany: Promise and Tragedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 97–115.

Furthermore, the level of images and discursive notions about the First World War and war veterans will be taken into account. It will be argued that the ‘mythification’ of the ‘war veteran’ and his appropriation for specific ideological claims and political goals were carried by representatives of the ‘war youth generation’. Although this younger generation, born after 1900, had not actively served in the First World War, its idealistic and heroic imagination of war, veterans, and ‘front experience’ came to pervade German political culture in the interwar period. National Socialism’s claim to represent the ‘front spirit’ and the martial legacy of the First World War legitimised its political demands and its political power after 1933, although the movement did initially not draw a lot of support from the ‘real’ war veterans. However, the different veterans’ organisations could not agree on one interpretation and ideological narrative of war and defeat, which could have unequivocally contradicted the romantic and heroic representation of the war by the ‘war youth generation’.

## Demobilisation and the Emergence of the *Freikorps*

The military demobilisation process, as the first step of the transition from a wartime to a peace society, did not encounter any major problems in Germany.<sup>6</sup> Some studies referred to the covert military strike and the signs of disintegration in the German army of 1918. According to this interpretation, German soldiers started to demobilise well before the signing of the armistice.<sup>7</sup> The large majority of the eleven million German soldiers who were in service on 11 November 1918 demobilised successfully and returned to a civilian existence.<sup>8</sup> Most revolutionary soldiers’ councils were dissolved in early 1919 because the soldiers they represented had simply left military service. The reintegration of ex-combatants in the labour market and in social and economic structures was, in the long term, indeed a burden and was perceived as such in the immediate postwar months, but that problem was by no means specific to Germany.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson, ed., *Sortir de la Grande Guerre: Le monde et l'après-1918* (Paris: Tallandier, 2008); Richard Bessel, *Germany after the First World War* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 69–90; Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross, ed., *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignis, Wirkung, Nachwirkung* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999).

<sup>7</sup> Wilhelm Deist, ‘Verdeckter Militärstreik im Kriegsjahr 1918?’ in *Der Krieg des kleinen Mannes*, ed. Wolfram Wette (Munich: Piper, 1992), 146–167; Christoph Jahr, *Gewöhnliche Soldaten: Desertion und Deserteure im deutschen und britischen Heer 1914–1918* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998).

<sup>8</sup> Nicolas Beaupré, *Das Trauma des großen Krieges 1918–1932/33* (Darmstadt: wbg, 2009), 38–61; Matthew N. Bucholtz, ‘Kamerad oder Genosse? The Contested Frontkämpfer Identity in Weimar Revolutionary Politics,’ in *Political Violence and Democracy in Western Europe, 1918–1940*, ed. Chris Millington and Kevin Passmore (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 48–61; Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner*, 18–24; Scott Stephenson, *The Final Battle: Soldiers of the Western Front and the German Revolution of 1918* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 312–322.

<sup>9</sup> Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, ‘Violence et consentement: La “culture de guerre” du premier conflit mondial,’ in *Pour une histoire culturelle*, ed. Jean-Pierre Rioux and Jean-François

For the immediate postwar period, the activities of the *Freikorps*, paramilitary units which fought left-wing socialist and communist uprisings, were usually perceived as an indication of the ‘brutalisation’ process as a result of the war, and as the decisive ‘missing link’ between the First World War and the rise of the NSDAP.<sup>10</sup> The formation of the *Freikorps* after November 1918 was based on concerns by the Social Democratic government about its political and military situation. It had to meet its armistice obligation to retreat from the occupied territories and from the Rhineland. At the same time, the government and the army High Command were compelled to maintain a military force in case the military conflict was resumed. The perceived necessity of establishing armed militias to uphold the existing social and political order within Germany and in the Baltic region against revolutionary Bolshevik uprisings even resulted in a partial state-initiated ‘remobilisation’ until 1920.<sup>11</sup> Although the founding and the counter-revolutionary activities of the *Freikorps* were sanctioned by Social Democratic governments, the extremist and often anti-Semitic ideological premises of many *Freikorps* leaders and the experience of political violence did contribute to the political radicalisation and ‘brutalisation’ processes. The fights in German cities in 1920 and 1921 made extreme right groups believe that paramilitary violence was a viable and acceptable method in political and ideological confrontations.<sup>12</sup>

However, when reviewing the actual membership of these groups, statistics reveal that only 400,000 joined these paramilitary squads, compared to a total of over thirteen million German men who were mobilised between 1914 and 1918. The *Freikorps* faced severe difficulties in recruiting war veterans for any political or ideological goal. Benjamin Ziemann’s analysis of veterans’ reintegration in Bavaria reveals that the large majority of war veterans successfully reintegrated in peacetime society and resented a resumption of violent conflict or a return to military discipline. The *Freikorps* leaders were indeed former army officers and military leaders, who refused to believe ‘that

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Sirinelli (Paris: Éd. du Seuil, 1997), 251–271, here: 255–257; Richard Bessel, ‘The “front generation” and the politics of Weimar Germany,’ in *Generations in Conflict: Youth Revolt and Generation Formation in Germany 1770–1968*, ed. Mark Roseman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 121–136, here: 124–130; Benjamin Ziemann, *Front und Heimat: Ländliche Kriegserfahrungen im südlichen Bayern 1914–1923* (Essen: Klartext, 1997).

<sup>10</sup> Bessel, ‘Militarismus’; Bruce Campbell, *The sa Generals and the Rise of Nazism* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), 15–21; Nigel H. Jones, *Hitler’s Heralds: The Story of the Freikorps 1918–1923* (London: Murray, 1987); Peter Hans Merkl, *Political Violence under the Swastika: 581 early Nazis* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 28–58, 153–172, 207–230; Robert George Leeson Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism: The Free Corps Movement in Postwar Germany 1918–1923* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1952).

<sup>11</sup> Adam R. Seipp, *The Ordeal of Peace: Demobilization and the Urban Experience in Britain and Germany, 1917–1921* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

<sup>12</sup> Hannsjoachim Wolfgang Koch, *Der deutsche Bürgerkrieg: Eine Geschichte der deutschen und österreichischen Freikorps 1918–1923* (Berlin: Ullstein, 1978); Hagen Schulze, *Freikorps und Republik 1918–1920* (Boppard am Rhein: Harald Boldt Verlag, 1969); Matthias Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich? Zu Genese und Wandel des Freikorpsmythos* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2008); Stephenson, *The Final Battle*, 313–322.

their sacrifices for the fatherland were in vain' and therefore succumbed to extreme political solutions and adventurism, both on the left and the right wing side. The rank and file, in contrast, consisted of both younger and militant veterans, who had not joined the front troops as 'storm troopers' until 1918, and members of the 'war youth generation' without any first-hand front experience.<sup>13</sup>

The large majority of German war veterans declined to become politically engaged, and, if they did, they did not necessarily join extreme right parties and movements. Although exemplary continuities can be and were identified, *Freikorps* members were only a minority of war veterans, and the NSDAP incorporated in its turn only a minority of *Freikorps* fighters before 1933. The next section will therefore set out to analyse the political paths taken by the 'genuine' war veterans and their veterans' organisations, and their failure to agree on a common narrative about the front and their war experiences. After that, attention will be paid to the collective imagination and interpretation of the construct of 'war veteran' in Weimar political and popular culture.

## Veterans' Organisations and their Political Activities

The demobilised soldiers joined several different veterans' organisations. Because the large number of this type of associations, this analysis will consider only a selection, based on political aspects and their respective relevance for political culture in the Weimar Republic and the rise of National Socialism. The social democratic *Reichsbund*, the communist *Rote Frontkämpferbund*, and the conservative *Kyffhäuserbund* will therefore be referred to only briefly. The main focus of this section is reserved for the largely social democratic *Reichsbanner* and the right-wing *Stahlhelm* as politically active organisations which exerted a strong influence on discourses of 'veterans' and 'war experience' in interwar Germany.

The large *Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen* [Reich League of War Disabled, War Veterans, and War Dependants] which was loosely aligned to the *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* [SPD; Social Democratic Party of Germany], counted no less than 830,000 members in 1922. This League was founded in 1917 as a social democratic alternative to the conservative *Kriegervereine* [Veterans' associations] with the purpose of organising and defending the interests of veterans and war disabled, but it did not gain political significance or a major role in constructing the collective memory and representation of the First World War.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Bessel, 'Militarismus,' 200–203; Bessel, 'The "front generation",' 126–133; Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, 29–50; Ziemann, *Front und Heimat*, 394–437.

<sup>14</sup> James M. Diehl, 'The Organization of German Veterans, 1917–1919,' *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 11 (1971): 141–184; Christian Weiß, "'Soldaten des Friedens': Die pazifistischen Veteranen und Krieg-

The so-called *Rote Frontkämpferbund* [League of Red Front-Fighters], which was founded in 1924 and counted up to 85,000 members, exemplifies how communist left-wing war veterans contributed to the highly polarised and radicalised political culture of the Weimar Republic. The large majority of *Rote Frontkämpferbund* members were actually too young to have experienced the trenches themselves. The communist veterans' organisation and its adversary, the *sa*, represent notable exceptions in this respect.<sup>15</sup> For the purpose of this article, however, the existence of the *Rote Frontkämpferbund* may help remind that war veterans from the First World War could as well be drawn to revolutionary or communist political activities and political violence.

One of the largest veterans' associations in the Weimar Republic, numbering up to 2.8 million members in 1930, the *Kyffhäuserbund* [Kyffhäuser League] federation has attracted relatively little attention from researchers. As a continuation of prewar associations, the so-called *Kriegervereine* joining the federation applied a rather traditional, old-fashioned repertoire, organised commemoration ceremonies, and claimed that they maintained the values and best practices of the Prussian army.<sup>16</sup> After a membership decline directly prior to 1914, these associations regained importance after the First World War. They did not pursue their own political agenda, although tradition and army habits led them to reject Social Democracy and pacifism, and in the presidential elections of 1932 they reluctantly supported their honorary President, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg.<sup>17</sup> Most activities of the *Kyffhäuserbund* took place as local actions, celebrations, and ceremonies by local *Vereine*, and they rarely voiced political demands in the public sphere. However, their existence and local respectability as civil society organisations may have played a significant role in the rise of National Socialism. Oded Heilbronner has pointed out that on a local level, many *sa* units adopted the normal and quite traditional repertoire of a *Kriegerverein*. Undistinguishable from

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sopfer des Reichsbundes und ihre Kontakte zu den französischen anciens combattants 1919–1933,' in *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 183–204, here: 183–188.

<sup>15</sup> Kurt Finker, *Geschichte des Roten Frontkämpferbundes* (Berlin: Dietz, 1982); Kurt G.P. Schuster, *Der Rote Frontkämpferbund 1924–29: Beiträge zur Geschichte und Organisationsstruktur eines politischen Kampfbundes* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1975); Carsten Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold und der Rote Frontkämpferbund in Sachsen 1924–1933* (Köln: Böhlau, 2009).

<sup>16</sup> Diehl, 'The Organization of German Veterans,' 142–147; Christopher James Elliott, 'The Kriegervereine and the Weimar Republic,' *Journal of Contemporary History* 10 (1975): 109–129; Thomas Rohkrämer, *Der Militarismus der 'kleinen Leute': Die Kriegervereine im Deutschen Kaiserreich 1871–1914* (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1990).

<sup>17</sup> Bessel, 'Militarismus,' 204–206; Diehl, 'The Organization of German Veterans,' 171–178; Elliott, 'The Kriegervereine,' 119–126; Karl Führer, 'Der Deutsche Reichskriegerbund Kyffhäuser 1930–1934: Politik, Ideologie und Funktion eines "unpolitischen" Verbandes,' *Militärgeschichtliche Mitteilungen* 36, no. 2 (1984): 57–76.

the ‘normal’ veterans’ organisation, the *sa* conveyed a respectable image and made National Socialism an acceptable political option in local society.<sup>18</sup>

The republican veterans’ organisation *Reichsbanner Schwarz Rot Gold* [Black, Red, Gold Banner of the Reich] was founded in February 1924 as a direct reaction to left-ist and rightist coups. Although the initiative to its founding was taken in Social Democratic circles, membership was open to all republican political parties: besides the *spd*, this included the left-liberal *Deutsche Demokratische Partei* [DDP; German Democratic Party] and the Catholic *Zentrum* party. The *Reichsbanner* was one of the largest civil society organisations in the Weimar Republic, numbering up to three million members in 1925. Its uniformed appearances and mass manifestations under the colours black-red-gold were successful instruments in supporting and defending the Republic in public space.<sup>19</sup> Its display of the republican black-red-gold flag and republican symbols and their defence against right-wing and National Socialist colours and symbols, can be considered significant contributions to Weimar political culture. The *Reichsbanner* did manage to mobilise thousands of its members in annual mass rallies for the celebration of Constitution Day on 11 August, in order to assert the symbols of the Republic in public space and in German political culture.<sup>20</sup> Although 80 to 90% of *Reichsbanner* membership consisted of social democrats, the organisation boasted a non-partisan character and did therefore not interfere in election campaigns on behalf of the *spd*.<sup>21</sup> As a result of this, Social Democratic symbols were strictly avoided: this included red flags, the singing of the *Internationale*, taking part in the May Day demonstration, or cooperation with Social Democratic trade unions or youth organisations.<sup>22</sup>

The political involvement of the *Reichsbanner* was a subject of contention, both within the organisation itself and in German society in general. Left-wing socialists

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<sup>18</sup> Oded Heilbronner, ‘Der verlassene Stammtisch: Vom Verfall der bürgerlichen Infrastruktur und dem Aufstieg der NSDAP am Beispiel der Region Schwarzwald,’ *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 19 (1993): 178–201. Cf. Sven Reichardt, ‘Selbstorganisation und Zivilgesellschaft: Soziale Assoziationen und politische Mobilisierung in der deutschen und italienischen Zwischenkriegszeit,’ in *Zivilgesellschaft als Geschichte: Studien zum 19. und 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Ralph Jessen, Sven Reichardt and Ansgar Klein (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2004), 219–238.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Philip Chickering, ‘The Reichsbanner and the Weimar Republic, 1924–26,’ *The Journal of Modern History* 40 (1968): 524–534; Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold*, 68–80, 256–260; Dirk Schumann, *Politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik 1918–1933: Kampf um die Straße und Furcht vor dem Bürgerkrieg* (Essen: Klartext, 2001), 210–213; Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 102–118.

<sup>20</sup> Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 45; Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 102–118, 304–320.

<sup>21</sup> Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner*, 266–268; Stefan Ummenhofer, *Wie Feuer und Wasser? Katholizismus und Sozialdemokratie in der Weimarer Republik* (Berlin: wvb Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Berlin, 2003), 250–255.

<sup>22</sup> Bundesarchiv Berlin-Lichterfelde (hereafter: ba), Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, 2. Otto Krille, ‘Rundschreiben No. 4 an alle Ortsvereine,’ 29 April 1931; Max Kranz, ‘Reichsbanner und Schutzbund,’ *Das Freie Wort* 2, no. 47 (1930): 19–20; Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 304–328.

and communists condemned the social democratic veterans' organisation and its repertoire of disciplined marches and uniforms, which would allegedly too much resemble the *Stahlhelm*.<sup>23</sup> Right-wing groups held the opposite stance and suspected that the *Reichsbanner* was a purely Social Democratic party organisation, designed to alienate young people from their proper class interest or from the Church and draw them into the Social Democratic camp. The German Catholic Bishops' Conference declared on 12 August 1926 that Catholic young people should not enter any interconfessional organisation which might endanger the internal peace and unity of the people. Although the gravest objections concerned right-wing paramilitary corps, the *Reichsbanner* was implicitly included in this description 'for parity reasons'.<sup>24</sup> Even the German police considered the *Reichsbanner* as a left-wing organisation and confiscated its flags and symbols as allegedly 'political', but at the same time tolerated right-wing or Nazi symbols, such as the swastika.<sup>25</sup>

These controversies were mirrored by discussions within the Social Democratic political-social community and the *Reichsbanner* itself. On the one hand, the left-wing socialist circle around the journal *Jungsozialistische Blätter*, inspired by the Austrian socialist Julius Deutsch, demanded the transformation of the organisation into a genuine Social Democratic movement, such as the Austrian *Republikanischer Schutzbund*. As soon as the class struggle would result in an ultimate confrontation between workers and bourgeoisie, they argued, the working class needed to have its own prepared combat organisation. It would not do to have the *Reichsbanner* divided by class divisions and to find out at the last moment that a proper Social Democratic paramilitary organisation was necessary.<sup>26</sup> On the other hand, many representatives of the spd and of Social Democratic organisations voiced concerns about the paramilitary repertoire

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<sup>23</sup> Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner*, 96, 103–112; Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 118–123, 202–243, 266–273.

<sup>24</sup> Heinz Hürten, ed., *Akten deutscher Bischöfe über die Lage der Kirche 1918–1933* i (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2007), 695–729; Wieland Vogel, *Katholische Kirche und nationale Kampfverbände in der Weimarer Republik* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald-Verlag, 1989). Cf. 'Die Wahrheit über das "Reichsbanner",' *Der Stahlhelm* 6, no. 29 (1924): 1–2; 'Zentrum und Reichsbanner,' *Germania*, 28 July 1927 (Abend): 1–2; Wilm Bargon, 'Reichsbanner, Zentrum und Windthorstbund,' *Der Stahlhelm* 8, no. 34 (1926): 2; Aloys Nölle, 'Zentrumsjugend oder Jugendpartei?' *Germania*, 20 July 1924 (Morgen): 9.

<sup>25</sup> For example: 'Die Hakenkreuzler obenauf!' *Vorwärts*, 11 August 1925 (Morgen): 6; 'Republikaner oder Hakenkreuzler?' *Vorwärts*, 11 August 1925 (Abend): 3.

<sup>26</sup> 'Antifascismus! Neue Kampfmittel des Proletariats,' *Sächsisches Volksblatt*, 27 May 1926: 1–2; 'Reichsbanner und Partei,' *Chemnitzer Volksstimme*, 14 July 1926: 1–2; H. Hoffmann, 'Wehrhaftigkeit und Sozialismus,' *Jungsozialistische Blätter* 6, no. 1 (1927): 17–19; Otto Jenssen, 'Wehrhafter Pazifismus,' *Jungsozialistische Blätter* 6, no. 1 (1927): 20–22; Max Kranz, 'Proletarische Wehrhaftigkeit' *Leipziger Volkszeitung*, 28 February 1927: 1; Helmut Wagner, 'Das Reichsbanner – die proletarische Wehrorganisation?' *Jungsozialistische Blätter* 8, no. 2 (1929): 39–42. Cf. Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 229–244.

of the *Reichsbanner*. They suggested as early as 1924 that it would be better to stop the ‘military display, the imitation of Hitlerdom’.<sup>27</sup>

The *Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten*, founded in Magdeburg in December 1918, was not the largest veterans’ organisation in the Weimar Republic, but attracted most attention from historians. However, the broader historiography on the Weimar Republic did not yet reflect the main conclusions drawn by the three monographs<sup>28</sup> which deal specifically with the *Stahlhelm* as an organisation, providing a multi-faceted picture of its political development. The *Stahlhelm* and its political involvement are usually considered in the context of the rise of National Socialism. The veterans’ organisation, the right-conservative *Deutschnationale Volkspartei* [dnvp; German National People’s Party], and the NSDAP cooperated in the context of the referendum campaign against the Young Plan and its explicit consent to reparations in 1929. In the Bad Harzburg rally in October 1931, *Stahlhelm* members marched side by side with sa men. The main representatives of right-wing political movements, among them Franz Seldte for the *Stahlhelm* and Hitler for the NSDAP, came to a temporary political agreement. This did indeed confer a kind of respectability to the Nazi party. Although the Harzburg coalition itself turned out rather short-lived, Seldte became minister in Hitler’s first Cabinet on 30 January 1933. The *Stahlhelm* voluntarily dissolved in March 1934 and submitted to the Third Reich’s unitary veterans’ organisation. The *Stahlhelm*’s close cooperation with the NSDAP in several political projects let historians consider the veterans’ organisation as an active assistant of National Socialism on its road to power.<sup>29</sup>

However, a narrow focus on political actions immediately preceding or facilitating Hitler’s takeover of power is too one-sided a view on the political development of the *Stahlhelm*. When the organisation was founded, it was a markedly ‘apolitical’ or ‘politically neutral’ association and did not favour one particular political party. Franz Seldte was actually a member of the right-wing liberal *Deutsche Volkspartei* [dvp; German People’s Party], whereas the second chairman Theodor Duesterberg joined the conservative dnvp. This was, however, presented as a purely individual party affiliation, which did not concern the veterans’ organisation.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Plauener Angelegenheiten,’ *Volkszeitung für das Vogtland*, 31 July 1924: 7; Chickering, ‘The Reichsbanner,’ 532–534; Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner*, 357–359.

<sup>28</sup> Volker R. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm: Bund der Frontsoldaten, 1918–1935* (Düsseldorf: Droste, 1966); Alois Klotzbücher, ‘Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten, in der Weimarer Republik: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der “Nationalen Opposition” 1918–1933’ (PhD diss., Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nuremberg, 1964); Alessandro Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace: Gli ex combattenti e la politica nella Repubblica di Weimar* (Trento: Università degli Studi di Trento, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Anke Hoffstadt, ‘Frontgemeinschaft? Der “Stahlhelm. Bund der Frontsoldaten” und der Nationalsozialismus,’ in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 191–206; Klotzbücher, ‘Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm,’ 232–310; Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 68–95, 136–140.

<sup>30</sup> Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 38, 47–50, 69–78.

It must be remarked here that in the 1920s, an ‘apolitical’ standpoint could also mean a *de facto* refusal to recognise the Weimar Republic, and many German veterans and *Stahlhelm* members explicitly preferred the restoration of the monarchy.<sup>31</sup> Some local *Stahlhelm* sections were involved in or had strong connections to *Freikorps* actions against the organised working class and communist uprisings, in the *Kapp-Putsch* in March 1920, or in the political murders of Matthias Erzberger and Walther Rathenau.<sup>32</sup> Republican government authorities imposed a ban on the movement on 2 July 1922 after the Rathenau murder, but it was lifted by the Federal Court in January 1923. The *Stahlhelm* leadership had in turn to proclaim its loyalty and commitment to the Republic. This official declaration did not stop former *Freikorps* fighters from joining the veterans’ organisation when their paramilitary units were dissolved. However, in sharp contrast to the NSDAP and other right-wing groups and parties, the *Stahlhelm* organisation recognised the authority of the Weimar Republic in principle and agreed to cooperate with state authorities.<sup>33</sup>

The *Stahlhelm* united very diverse and dynamic political and ideological visions on the identity of the ‘front veteran’ and its role in German state and society. Conservative accounts of the military tradition of the German Empire alternated with vehemently anti-republican, conservative, and even racist positions, which did indeed favour right-wing coup d’états or political murders. The ideal front soldiers’ state was already called ‘the Third Reich’ as early as 1926.<sup>34</sup> The 15 December 1923 issue of the *Stahlhelm*’s journal reflected the perspective of the revolutionary avant-garde within the movement, represented by the younger veterans and writers of the Conservative Revolution. In a series of articles, in which war veterans representing different political parties and movements explained how their war experience had influenced their political motivation, even a member of the Communist Party (which was banned at that time) was included. It may be called remarkable that Kurt Tucholsky, writing under a pseudonym, and Ernst Jünger contributed to the same journal issue, which was dedicated to the vision that the veterans’ community should be a political movement in its own right, beyond traditional parties or the framework of the Weimar Republic.<sup>35</sup> This

<sup>31</sup> Peter Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism: Populism and Political Mobilization in Weimar Germany* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); Rudy Koshar, *Social Life, Local Politics, and Nazism: Marburg, 1880–1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1986); Fritz Richard Stern, ‘The Political Consequences of the Unpolitical German,’ in *The Failure of Illiberalism: Essays on the Political Culture of Modern Germany*, ed. Fritz Richard Stern (New York: Knopf, 1972), 3–25.

<sup>32</sup> Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 13–20, 27–37; Klotzbücher, ‘Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm,’ 3–9.

<sup>33</sup> ‘Der Stahlhelm,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 5 (1923), Sondernummer: 2–4; Die Bundesleitung, ‘Richtlinien,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 5 (1923), Sondernummer: 6; Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 36–38; Klotzbücher, ‘Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm,’ 12–21; Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 32–56, 125, 176.

<sup>34</sup> ‘Das dritte Reich: Vom Staat, um den wir kämpfen,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 8, no. 13 (1926): 1–2; Helmut Franke, ‘Das System des Faschismus. ii. Mussolinis Regierung,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 7, no. 24 (1925): 5; Rüdiger Graf von der Goltz, ‘Der Kampf gegen den Frontsoldaten,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 4, no. 5 (1922): 67–68; Detlef Schmude, ‘“Ostara”, Bücherei der Blondnen,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 4, no. 4 (1922): 55–57.

<sup>35</sup> Helmut Franke, ‘Ausklang,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 5, no. 15 (1923): 25; Erich Rudolf, ‘Durch Krieg zur Freiheit,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 5, no. 15 (1923): 12–13; Joachim Seligsohn, ‘Bekenntnis zum Sozialismus,’ *Der*

interpretation of the veterans' identity was actually not supported by a majority of the *Stahlhelm* membership and by the movement's central leadership, and the responsible chief editor Helmut Franke was discharged a few months later. At least in this brief episode, however, socialist or social democratic political views were in principle accepted by the *Stahlhelm* as a part of a broader veterans' movement, transcending party political fragmentation.<sup>36</sup>

This was not the last project to achieve a political unity based on a shared notion of the 'front community', but after the founding of its competitors, the *Reichsbanner* and the *Rote Frontkämpferbund*, the *Stahlhelm* adopted a more right-wing political profile. It tried to exert influence on the political level on behalf of the veterans and regularly published political recommendations for national or regional elections. In the 1926 regional elections in Saxony and the national *Reichstag* elections of 1928, the *Stahlhelm* drafted its own political agenda and list of political demands, sought supporters for this programme in existing political parties, and promised to back these individual candidates in their election campaign. Its goal was to establish a cross-party veterans' front in Parliament, which would consider veterans' grievances and German national interests and national honour, according to *Stahlhelm* perceptions. This political project failed, on the one hand, because its 'front ideology' was not sufficiently coherent to reconcile most political antagonisms, on the other, because the *Stahlhelm* could not make members of parliament responsible or accountable to itself, and effectively enforce the adoption of its agenda.<sup>37</sup> The *Stahlhelm's* failure to become a political organisation, despite all its efforts to carve out its own sphere of influence between affiliated political parties, is illustrated by the April 1932 presidential elections. Duesterberg ran for President, although many members of his organisation were actually in favour of either Hitler or Hindenburg. When Duesterberg withdrew his candidacy for the second round, the organisation proved unable to take a political decision and to speak out in favour of either one of the remaining candidates.<sup>38</sup>

The *Stahlhelm's* dilettantish appearance and actions on the political level were indeed a factor in National Socialism's road to power. The veterans' organisation helped fuel internal disagreement in the liberal-conservative subculture and encouraged distrust of traditional right wing political parties. The impression that these parties did not properly represent the interests of the old middle class, the rural population, or

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*Stahlhelm* 5, no. 15 (1923): 11–12; Ignaz Wrobel, 'Das Militär als Erzieher,' *Der Stahlhelm* 5, no. 15 (1923): 16–17.

<sup>36</sup> Helmut Franke, 'Die Tragödie der Frontsoldaten,' *Arminius* 7, no. 40 (1926): 3–4; Helmut Franke, 'Das Schicksal der Standarte,' *Arminius* 7, no. 41 (1926): 3–4; Ernst Jünger, 'Wesen des Frontsoldatentums,' *Die Standarte* (1925), 1: 2. Cf. Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 68–70, 86–87, 91–101; Hans-Harald Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller: Der Kriegsroman in der Weimarer Republik* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1986) 276–283; Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 53–55.

<sup>37</sup> Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 68–70, 86–87, 109–112; Diehl, *Paramilitary politics*, 199–276; Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism*, 178–189; Klotzbücher, 'Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm,' 74–101, 149–166; Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 56–68.

<sup>38</sup> Berghahn, *Der Stahlhelm*, 173–214; Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 97–128.

war veterans, contributed to the disintegration of the Weimar political landscape.<sup>39</sup> The NSDAP managed to infiltrate organisations of local civil society which had traditionally supported the dvp or dnvp, but now turned away from these parties. This extensive grass-roots network provided the electoral basis for the Nazi successes from 1930 onwards.<sup>40</sup> Because the *Stahlhelm* pursued its own political agenda and was a direct competitor of the sa, the veterans' organisation was initially not among these civil society organisations, but it did play a significant role in undermining the authority of liberal, conservative, and parliamentary politics. However, its complex history of unintended consequences and political mistakes precludes premature conclusions about veterans' allegedly self-evident commitment to extreme right political positions.<sup>41</sup>

## Stahlhelm and Reichsbanner: The Struggle over Public Space and the Definition of 'War Veterans'

This review of the largest and politically most significant veterans' organisations in the Weimar Republic shows a large variety of political orientations and strategies. The largest association, the *Kyffhäuserbund*, was indeed right-wing conservative, but its overt lack of political activism has resulted in utter neglect by historians of political culture and of the rise of National Socialism. Apart from their opposite political standpoints, the *Reichsbanner* and *Stahlhelm* did engage in very similar social and cultural activities. This included welfare projects for disabled veterans or commemoration ceremonies for the fallen, particularly on a local level.<sup>42</sup> When the sa was banned in April 1932, the *Stahlhelm* explicitly pleaded against a simultaneous ban of *Reichsbanner* activities for parity reasons, which was demanded by German-national and conservative

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<sup>39</sup> Fritzsche, *Rehearsals for Fascism*; Larry Eugene Jones, "'The Dying Middle": Weimar Germany and the Fragmentation of Bourgeois Politics,' *Central European History* 5 (1972): 23–54; Helge Matthiesen, *Bürgertum und Nationalsozialismus in Thüringen: Das bürgerliche Gotha von 1918 bis 1930* (Jena: Fischer, 1994).

<sup>40</sup> Sheri Berman, 'Civil Society and the Collapse of the Weimar Republic,' *World Politics* 49 (1997): 401–429; Thomas Childers, ed., *The Formation of the Nazi Constituency, 1919–1933* (London: Barnes & Noble Imports, 1986); Heilbronner, 'Der verlassene Stammtisch'; Rudy Koshar, 'From Stammtisch to Party: Nazi Joiners and the Contradictions of Grass Roots Fascism in Weimar Germany,' *Journal of Modern History* 59 (1987): 1–24; Koshar, *Social Life*.

<sup>41</sup> Hoffstadt, 'Frontgemeinschaft?' 191–200; Klotzbücher, 'Der politische Weg des Stahlhelm,' 311–325; Alessandro Salvador, 'The Political Strategies of the Stahlhelm Veterans' League and the National Socialist German Workers' Party, 1918–1933,' in *Movements and Ideas of the Extreme Right in Europe: Positions and Continuities*, ed. Nicola Kristin Karcher and Anders Granås Kjølsetvedt (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2013), 57–78.

<sup>42</sup> Salvador, *La guerra in tempo di pace*, 140–162; Benjamin Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations: Republican War Veterans and Weimar Political Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 128–139.

newspapers.<sup>43</sup> On an international level, contacts with Allied veterans' organisations were initiated by the social democratic *Reichsbund der Kriegsbeschädigten, Kriegsteilnehmer und Kriegshinterbliebenen*, whereas the *Reichsbanner* and the *Stahlhelm* were equally distrusted by their French counterparts. The close cooperation between German and French veterans' organisations and the maintenance of the German war cemeteries abroad was not even interrupted when the National Socialist regime took control over the German veterans' movement in 1933.<sup>44</sup>

Descriptions of either the *Reichsbanner* or the *Stahlhelm* as 'militias' or paramilitary organisations are not incorrect, but rather incomplete with a view to the large variety of societal tasks and activities which the two veterans' organisations displayed. Violent confrontations between opposing veterans' organisations could indeed occur, depending on the local political context. The tendency of all political movements to claim possession of public space aggravated the political tensions surrounding veterans' manifestations. Especially in the main centres of the German workers' movement, each public appearance of the *Stahlhelm*, if only a march or ceremony to commemorate the war dead or to celebrate the founding of the German Empire in 1871, was considered as a provocation by Socialist and Communist workers and could become a reason for the eruption of political violence. Whereas the *Stahlhelm* was eager to show its presence in public space after the ban on its organisation was lifted in 1923, socialist workers felt provoked by the almost weekly military parades of the veterans' league, which were very much reminiscent of the old Imperial army. Social Democratic politicians in Halle and Eisleben complained against the marches of such 'legally banned organisations' in public space. Instead of banning these manifestations, the police protected them and thereby enabled the public 'success' of the 'swastika men' (referring to the *Stahlhelm*) in occupying public space. *Stahlhelm* and *Rote Frontkämpferbund* members accused each other of provoking violent clashes in public space and of evoking a civil war atmosphere.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> 'sa-Verbot muss aufgehoben werden!' *Stahlhelm-Pressedienst*, no. 18 (1932): 1–2; 'Fort mit dem sa.-Verbot,' *Kreuz-Zeitung*, 20 April 1932: 3.

<sup>44</sup> Susanne Brandt, *Vom Kriegsschauplatz zum Gedächtnisraum: Die Westfront 1914–1940* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2000); William Mulligan, 'German Veterans Associations and the Culture of Peace: The Case of the Reichsbanner,' in *The Great War and Veterans' Internationalism*, ed. Julia Eichenberg and John Paul Newman (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 139–161, here: 145–150; Holger Skor, *Brücken über den Rhein: Frankreich in der Wahrnehmung und Propaganda des Dritten Reiches, 1933–1939* (Essen: Klartext Medienwerkstatt, 2011), 203–277; Claire Moreau Trichet, *Henri Pichot et l'Allemagne de 1930 à 1945* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004); Weiß, "'Soldaten des Friedens'"; Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*, 134–158.

<sup>45</sup> Archiv der sozialen Demokratie der Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (hereafter: AdsD), Nachlaß Carl Severing, 235, Nr. 17. Georg Petersdorff, Letter to Karl Severing, 28 June 1923; AdsD, Nachlaß Carl Severing, 235, Nr. 18. Reinhold Drescher, Letter to Carl Severing, 26 June 1923; W. Poche, *Die Hetze gegen den Stahlhelm, ihre Auswirkungen und die Forderungen und Wünsche des Stahlhelms* (Halle, 1926), 8–9. Cf. Sven Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde: Gewalt und Gemeinschaft im italienischen Squadrismus und in der deutschen sa* (Cologne: Böhlau, 2009), 108–140; Dirk Schumann, 'Der aufgeschobene Bürgerkrieg: Sozialer Protest und politische Gewalt in Deutschland,' *Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft*

However, these incidents and confrontations can in most cases not be traced back to direct actions of the veterans' movement, and even less to unresolved front traumas or a 'brutalisation of politics' as a result of the First World War. They rather mirrored existing political tensions within German society and between the political-social communities, of which the respective veterans' organisations happened to be part. The *Stahlhelm* and the *Reichsbanner* were not founded as paramilitary organisations, with the intention to fight street battles for political goals. Their uniforms and disciplined marches were 'normal' forms and methods for civil society organisations in German political culture of that time. In their gradual political radicalisation and participation in violent confrontations, the *Stahlhelm* and the *Reichsbanner* were followers, not trailblazers of the political development. The eruption of violent confrontations was determined by local circumstances and by current political issues, and can even be interpreted as a typically ritualised form of political contention.<sup>46</sup>

A more significant aspect of the polarised political culture of the Weimar Republic, and one in which the veterans' organisations took a genuine interest, was the collective memory of war and defeat, the national commemorative culture, and the perseverance of the 'culture of war'. German veterans' organisations could never agree on one coherent narrative of the war. The *Reichsbanner* perceived the suffering in the First World War as a primary incentive for active republican citizenship in the new Germany. The *Stahlhelm*, however, stuck to the positive values of army and front service and to an idealised image of 'front community'. They could not successfully refute each other's narratives, but the emergence of one national commemorative culture was impeded.<sup>47</sup> German politics and civil society could not even agree on the location and the form of a national monument to commemorate the war dead.<sup>48</sup>

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44, no. 6 (1996): 526–544; Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 203–266; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Republikanische Kriegserinnerung in einer polarisierten Öffentlichkeit: Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold als Veteranenverband der sozialistischen Arbeiterschaft,' *Historische Zeitschrift* 267, no. 2 (1998): 357–398, here: 385–390.

<sup>46</sup> Matthias Schartl, 'Ein Kampf ums nackte Überleben: Volkstumult und Pöbelexzesse als Ausdruck des Aufbegehrens in der Spätphase der Weimarer Republik,' in *Pöbelexzesse und Volkstumulte in Berlin: Zur Sozialgeschichte der Straße (1830–1980)*, ed. Manfred Gailus (Berlin: Verlag Europäische Perspektiven, 1984), 125–167; Petra Maria Schulz, *Ästhetisierung von Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 2004); Dirk Schumann, 'Political Violence, Contested Public Space, and Reasserted Masculinity in Weimar Germany,' in *Weimar Publics / Weimar Subjects: Rethinking the political culture of Germany in the 1920s*, ed. Kathleen Canning, Kerstin Brandt and Kristin McCuire (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 236–253; Schumann, *Politische Gewalt*, 315–328, 359–366; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Germany after the First World War – A Violent Society? Results and Implications of Recent Research on Weimar Germany,' *Journal of Modern European History* 1 (2003): 80–95.

<sup>47</sup> Mulligan, 'German Veterans Associations'; Weiß, "'Soldaten des Friedens'"; Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*.

<sup>48</sup> Beaupré, *Das Trauma des großen Krieges*, 116–123; Sabine Behrenbeck, 'Zwischen Trauer und Heroisierung: Vom Umgang mit Kriegstod und Niederlage nach 1918,' in *Kriegsende 1918: Ereignisse, Wirkung, Nachwirkung*, ed. Jörg Duppler and Gerhard Paul Gross (Munich: Oldenbourg, 1999), 315–339; Ziemann, *Contested Commemorations*.

The *Reichsbanner* and the *Stahlhelm* competed for the claim to represent the ‘true’ World War veteran. Both organisations tried to discredit each other by stating that the other’s members did not consist of genuine war veterans. The members of the opposing organisation had allegedly been merely reservists, spent the war in an honorary or administrative position, or served in the kitchens in the *Etappe* [back area], in short, they had not really been at the front and had not had ‘combat experience’. The social democratic press regularly called the *Stahlhelm* ‘gentlemen from the *Etappe*’, ‘national rabble’, or outright ‘street bandits’.<sup>49</sup> The *Reichsbanner* mocked *Stahlhelm* marches in public space for its display of ‘milksofs’ and ‘bemedalled old men’ – suggesting that since *Stahlhelm* members were apparently either elderly ex-servicemen or teenagers, they could not claim front experience during the First World War.<sup>50</sup> The *Stahlhelm* and dnvp and NSDAP representatives insulted Social Democrats and *Reichsbanner* members vice versa for being deserters, disloyal revolutionaries, and ‘red cowards’.<sup>51</sup>

Both the *Reichsbanner* and the *Stahlhelm* contributed to a political culture which idealised uniforms, marches, and the display of unrelenting and determined masculinity. The veterans’ organisations implicitly adhered to the same ideal of the ‘front community’ of the First World War and the heroic and patriotic ‘front veteran’. Even though they accused each other of being rear soldiers or deserters or adopted a slightly different ideological understanding of the war experience, both organisations accepted a distinct identity of ‘veterans’ and a military repertoire style, both of which characterised the political culture of the Weimar Republic.

The military, disciplined, and masculine image of heroic, dauntless, and unrelenting warriors, which both *Reichsbanner* and *Stahlhelm* tried to convey and assert against each other, excluded other age or gender groups. Their local branches, once ordinary civil society associations, gradually turned into strong and disciplined paramilitary organisations. Even the *Reichsbanner* was supposed to display a ‘proletarian discipline’. Republican veterans were officially discouraged to carry walking sticks or umbrellas in their uniformed and disciplined marches, to smoke, or to turn up drunk, in order not to diminish the effect on the audience. Women could still join subsidiary organisations, but they should not be present in public manifestations and thereby cause damage to the masculine, soldierly appearance of the veterans’ organisation.<sup>52</sup> By narrowing down its definition, the discursive ‘war veteran’ became a restricted category. The veterans denied membership of this community to members of younger generations,

<sup>49</sup> Poche, *Die Hetze gegen den Stahlhelm*, 5–7.

<sup>50</sup> ‘Schwarz-Rot-Gold marschiert!’ The German words were ‘Milchgesichter’ and ‘Klempnerläden’.

<sup>51</sup> ‘Auf die Straße: Politisches Strolchtum oder Notwehrrecht?’ *Der Stahlhelm* 8, no. 29 (1926): 1; ‘Bünde und Reichsbanner,’ *Der Stahlhelm* 10, no. 36 (1928): 1–2; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 600; Ziemann, ‘Republikanische Kriegserinnerung.’

<sup>52</sup> ba, Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, 2. Otto Krille, ‘Bundsrunschreiben No. 6,’ 27 June 1929; ba, Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold, 2. Otto Krille, ‘Runschreiben No. 6 an alle Ortsvereine,’ 15 April 1930; ‘Tritt gefaßt! Fahnen frei!’ *Das Reichsbanner*, 15 July 1925, Beilage für die Gaue Dortmund, Düsseldorf und Köln: 1; Rohe, *Das Reichsbanner*, 108–112, 364–375; Voigt, *Kampfbünde der Arbeiterbewegung*, 186–198, 275–276.

but at the same time failed to come to a clear definition and interpretation of war and war experience with their respective political-ideological opponents. This gave the opportunity to the younger generation to cultivate its own narrative in German collective commemorative and popular culture. In the next section, it will be argued that this ‘war youth generation’, its narrative of war, and its strong representation in the Nazi movement, are key factors to reach a better understanding of the ‘brutalisation’ of Weimar political culture and to establish a convincing connection between ‘war veteran’ as a discursive concept and the rise of National Socialism.

## National Socialism: The ‘War Youth Generation’ and German Commemorative Culture

The concept of a ‘generation’ is as misleading as the idea of ‘the front veteran’ because it presupposes fixed standard experiences during the First World War and a unified understanding of the world and of the social and political reality of the Weimar Republic, based on belonging to one age cohort.<sup>53</sup> The problem of a ‘lost generation’<sup>54</sup> was actually debated as early as the 1920s. Karl Mannheim and François Mentré introduced the concept of ‘generations’ in the scientific world, whereas the works of Ernst Jünger and Ernst Glaeser helped propagate the sense of a ‘generation conflict’ and a distinct identity of the ‘war generation’ in German society.<sup>55</sup> Detlev Peukert pointed out that the generation born 1895–1900, which was still young at the end of the war, was indeed a ‘lost generation’: they had less opportunities than older veterans to return to their homes, families, and jobs, and never had the chance to settle down in civilian life in the immediate postwar period as a result of economic disruption and mass unemployment. He identified the ensuing generation conflict as a major social and cultural point of contention in the Weimar Republic.<sup>56</sup> Psychohistorical studies

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<sup>53</sup> Bessel, ‘The “front generation”’; Dieter Dowe, ed., *Jugendprotest und Generationenkonflikt in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert: Deutschland, England, Frankreich und Italien im Vergleich* (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1986); Hans Jaeger, ‘Generationen in der Geschichte: Überlegungen zu einer umstrittenen Konzeption,’ *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 3, no. 4 (1977): 429–452.

<sup>54</sup> Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 1–4. The concept of a ‘lost generation’ was applied by Erich Maria Remarque in his controversial novel *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929).

<sup>55</sup> Hans Mommsen, ‘Generationskonflikt und Jugendrevolte in der Weimarer Republik,’ in *Mit uns zieht die neue Zeit: Der Mythos Jugend*, ed. Thomas Koebner, Rolf-Peter Janz and Frank Trommler (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1985), 50–67, here: 50–53; Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*; Bernd A. Rusinek, ‘Krieg als Sehnsucht: Militärischer Stil und “junge Generation” in der Weimarer Republik,’ in *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte im 20. Jahrhundert*, ed. Jürgen Reulecke (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2003), 127–144; Schulz, *Ästhetisierung von Gewalt*, 116–130; Barbara Stambolis, *Mythos Jugend – Leitbild und Krisensymptom: Ein Aspekt der politischen Kultur im 20. Jahrhundert* (Schwalbach: Wochenschau Verlag, 2003) 82–98, 140–144, 208–213; Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 42–84.

<sup>56</sup> Detlev J.K. Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik: Krisenjahre der Klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1987), 26–30, 91–100; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 369–387; Weitz, *Weimar Germany*, 20–23.

traced this generation's support of National Socialism back to collective childhood and adolescence traumas during the First World War.<sup>57</sup> Even when disregarding such approaches, research on 'war culture' confirmed the significance of these young people's war experience for the discursive and commemorative practices of the interwar period. In the following paragraphs, 'war experience', 'war veteran' and 'war youth generation' are analysed as discursive categories. On the level of political culture, they were able to create their own reality as strong contemporary narrative constructions.

Ongoing historical debates about statistics for the membership of the Nazi party and its paramilitary wing, the *sa*, reveal the problems of identifying the involvement of 'real' war veterans in the NSDAP. Michael Mann criticised how 'scholars ... generalize on the basis of subgroups, using a few biographies to support their own pet theory'.<sup>58</sup> Surveys of higher *sa* and *ss* levels do confirm that a large proportion of these echelons were recruited from war veterans. In a sample of 178 representatives of the *sa* higher echelons, Bruce Campbell determined that 76% had fought during the war.<sup>59</sup> The leaders of the NSDAP, Adolf Hitler, Rudolf Hess, and Hermann Göring, were front veterans themselves. However, the fact that many top Nazis were veterans does not imply that many veterans became Nazis, or even that most Nazis were ex-servicemen.

On the contrary, many studies about the NSDAP and the *sa* show that National Socialism drew its members primarily from the generation which directly followed the 'front generation'. The so-called 'war youth generation' was highly overrepresented among the *sa* rank and file. The large majority of *sa* street fighters were born between 1900 and 1910 and were still children during the First World War.<sup>60</sup> A significant part of the Nazi leadership, such as Heinrich Himmler or Martin Bormann, belonged to the so-called 'war youth generation'. Himmler and Bormann had been members of one of the *Freikorps*, but even their biographies were not typical for the Nazi constituency. Michael Wildt analysed the Gestapo and *ss* personnel during the Second World War. Of Wildt's sample of 221 leading *Reichssicherheitshauptamt* personnel, which was responsible for wartime radicalisation, the concentration camp apparatus,

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<sup>57</sup> For example Peter Loewenberg, 'The Psychohistorical Origins of the Nazi Youth Cohort,' *American Historical Review* 76 (1971): 1457–1502; Karl Mannheim, 'Das Problem der Generationen,' *Kölner Vierteljahreshefte für Soziologie* 7 (1928): 157–185 and 309–330; Klaus Theweleit, *Männerphantasien* (Frankfurt am Main: Verlag Roter Stern, 1977).

<sup>58</sup> Michael Mann, *The Dark Side of Democracy: Explaining Ethnic Cleansing* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 195–239, here esp. 216.

<sup>59</sup> Campbell, *The sa generals*, 142–143. Cf. Andrew C. Donson, 'Why Did German Youth become Fascists? Nationalist Males born 1900 to 1908 in War and Revolution,' *Social History* 31, no. 3 (2006): 337–358, here: 337–338; Merkl, *Political Violence under the Swastika*.

<sup>60</sup> Conan J. Fischer, *Stormtroopers: A Social, Economic and Ideological Analysis, 1929–35* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1983); Michael H. Kater, 'Generationskonflikt als Entwicklungsfaktor in der ns-Bewegung vor 1933,' *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 11 (1985): 217–243, here: 229–233; Peter Longrich, *Die braunen Bataillone: Geschichte der sa* (Munich: Beck, 1989), 84–92; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 346–389; Sven Reichardt, 'Die *sa* im "Nachkriegs-Krieg",' in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 243–259, here: 245–249.

and the holocaust, 77% were born after 1900 and thus belonged to the even younger generation, who were still children in 1918 and students in the 1920s. For many representatives of the ‘war youth generation’, the civil war scenes of 1923, the economic crisis, and the polarised and radicalised political culture of the Weimar Republic had been the dominating political experience of their youth.<sup>61</sup>

The young men belonging to the ‘war youth generation’ did have a ‘war experience’ of their own, although they did not enlist and were not at the front until the war was over. This ‘fatherless generation’<sup>62</sup> grew up during the war and experienced economic hardship or even hunger, without sufficient paternal authority, and received their share of nationalistic and militaristic indoctrination in the education system. Sebastian Haffner vividly described how school boys viewed the war merely as a great adventure or even a game. The First World War saw a tremendous increase of boys’ literature about the war and soldiers. The boys were raised with an idealistic and heroic image of war and front, without actually seeing or experiencing the horrors of the trenches themselves. Peter Merkl coined the concept of ‘victory-watchers’ to describe the way how these boys experienced their fathers’ or elder brothers’ war exploits.<sup>63</sup> When the fathers, the alleged war heroes, returned home in 1918 or 1919, they rarely conformed to this heroic image: some of them hit by a nervous ‘shell shock’, severely disabled, unwilling to comment on their experiences at the front, or voicing a pacifist worldview.<sup>64</sup>

The membership of some of the *Freikorps* paramilitary units in the period 1918–1923 can be retraced to this ‘war youth generation’. A backbone of seasoned officers and soldiers was supplemented by high school and university students who volunteered for service. Among their motivations to enlist was allegedly the wish to make up for the missed combat experience at the front. According to the writings of Ernst von

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<sup>61</sup> Michael Wildt, *Generation des Unbedingten: Das Führungskorps des Reichssicherheitshauptamtes* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2003). Cf. Ulrich Herbert, ‘Drei politische Generationen im 20. Jahrhundert,’ in *Generationalität und Lebensgeschichte*, 95–114, here: 97–104; Christian Ingrao, ‘Étudiants allemands, mémoire de guerre et militantisme nazi: étude de cas,’ *14–18 Aujourd’hui – Today – heute* 5 (2002): 54–71; Kater, ‘Generationskonflikt’.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Federn, *Psychologie der Revolution: Die vaterlose Gesellschaft* (Vienna: Anzengruber-Verlag, 1919). Cf. Andrew Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land: War Pedagogy, Nationalism, and Authority in Germany, 1914–1918* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010); Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 376.

<sup>63</sup> Merkl, *Political Violence under the Swastika*, 28, 157–165. Cf. Beaupré, *Das Trauma des großen Krieges*, 25–32, 231–236; Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land*, 59–107; Sebastian Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen: Die Erinnerungen 1914–1933* (Munich: dva, 2002), 20–33; Loewenberg, ‘The Psychohistorical Origins’; Reichardt, *Faschistische Kampfbünde*, 370–381; Reichardt, ‘Die sa im “Nachkriegs-Krieg”,’ 247–253.

<sup>64</sup> Specifically about war disabled: Deborah Cohen, *The War Come Home: Disabled Veterans in Britain and Germany, 1914–1939* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001); Sabine Kienitz, ‘Body Damage: War Disability and Constructions of Masculinity in Weimar Germany’, in *Home/Front: The Military, War and Gender in Twentieth-Century Germany*, ed. Karen Hagemann and Stefanie Schüler-Springorum (Oxford/New York: Berg, 2002), 181–203.

Salomon and Ernst Jünger, they felt that ‘a traitorous armistice had cheated them of their right to fight for the Fatherland and to participate in the glories and the romance of battle.’<sup>65</sup> Although the members of the *Freikorps* constituted a tiny minority of the ‘war youth generation’, their discursive imagination and interpretation of the First World War pervaded German political culture.<sup>66</sup>

For a full understanding of Weimar political culture, it has to be noted that war rhetoric and propaganda were not abandoned in November 1918. Cultural demobilisation was impeded because too many groups and parties in Germany had an interest in not accepting military defeat and peace. The chiliastic battle between good and evil was transferred from the war against foreign powers to a war against no less dangerous internal enemies: communists, revolutionaries, war profiteers, republican members of parliament, Jews.<sup>67</sup> The ‘war youth generation’ projected its own views and myths about the war, its ideals of the ideal community of the trenches, onto the political and social reality of the Weimar Republic and strongly rejected the boring construction of coalitions and compromises in the democratic system, which Joseph Goebbels called a ‘Republic of old men’.<sup>68</sup>

The idealistic and heroic projections on war and ‘front spirit’ and the refusal to accept German war guilt and military defeat gradually became dominant in German commemorative culture. The host of literature, memorial books, and films on the war contributed to a ‘brutalisation’ of political culture, but it must be noted that most accounts and novels were based on the projections and imagination of the war, not on ‘real’ experiences of veterans during the First World War.<sup>69</sup> Recent research about

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<sup>65</sup> Waite, *Vanguard of Nazism*, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Bessel, *Germany after the First World War*, 256–159; Donson, *Youth in the Fatherless Land*, 223–241; Haffner, *Geschichte eines Deutschen*, 42–48; Seipp, *The Ordeal of Peace*; Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?*; Wohl, *The Generation of 1914*, 53–61.

<sup>67</sup> Jost Dülffer, ‘Frieden schließen nach einem Weltkrieg? Die mentale Verlängerung der Kriegssituation in den Friedensschluß,’ in *Der verlorene Frieden: Politik und Kriegskultur nach 1918*, ed. Jost Dülffer and Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2002), 19–37; John Horne, ‘Kulturelle Demobilmachung 1919–1939: Ein sinnvoller historischer Begriff?’ in *Politische Kulturgeschichte der Zwischenkriegszeit 1918–1939*, ed. Wolfgang Hardtwig (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 129–150; Gerd Krumeich, ‘L’impossible sortie de guerre de l’Allemagne,’ in *Sortir de la Grande Guerre: Le monde et l’après-1918*, ed. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Christophe Prochasson (Paris: Tallandier, 2008), 145–163; Mosse, *Fallen Soldiers*, 161–181; Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?*; Jeffrey Verhey, *The Spirit of 1914: Militarism, Myth and Mobilization in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

<sup>68</sup> Elisabeth Domansky, ‘Politische Dimensionen von Jugendprotest und Generationenkonflikt in der Zwischenkriegszeit in Deutschland,’ in *Jugendprotest und Generationenkonflikt in Europa im 20. Jahrhundert: Deutschland, England, Frankreich und Italien im Vergleich*, ed. Dieter Dowe (Bonn: Verlag Neue Gesellschaft, 1986), 113–137; Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen, ‘Die Krise der jungen Generation und der Aufstieg des Nationalsozialismus,’ *Jahrbuch des Archivs der deutschen Jugendbewegung* 12 (1980): 53–82; Mommsen, ‘Generationskonflikt und Jugendrevolte,’ 59; Kater, ‘Generationskonflikt,’ 221–225, 239.

<sup>69</sup> Richard Bessel, ‘Kriegserfahrungen und Kriegserinnerungen: Nachwirkungen des Ersten Weltkrieges auf das politische und soziale Leben der Weimarer Republik,’ in *Kriegsbegeisterung und*

German literature in the 1920s pointed out that it is impossible to distinguish between ‘authentic’ memory and literary ‘fiction’. Franz Schauwecker’s *Im Todesrachen* (1919) and Adolf Hitler’s *Mein Kampf* (1925) were presented as autobiographical accounts, but contained very explicit political messages for the postwar situation. Conversely, Erich Maria Remarque’s *Im Westen nichts Neues* (1929), although fictional, implicitly claimed to represent the authentic, ‘true’ view of the ordinary soldier in the war.<sup>70</sup> Ernst Jünger’s first work *In Stahlgewittern* (1920) was still loosely based on his original war diaries and presented his experiences as those of an average front soldier, but it was initially not a bestseller. His later publications *Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis* (1922) and *Sturm* (1923) show a distinctive reinterpretation of his self-understanding as a war veteran and attributed a specific political meaning to war experience. As referred to before, Jünger reserved the concept of ‘front veteran’ for a selection of war participants only, for the ‘activist core of men’ who were proud of their historical achievements during the war and were supposed to change German state and society in a revolutionary way.<sup>71</sup> Dirk Schumann summarised the construction of ‘war experience’ as follows: ‘It was not the violent experience of war itself, which determined the future development, but the respective political culture, in which this experience was incorporated or intensified.’<sup>72</sup> The new type of commemorative culture and the public imagination on the war were encouraged by young people who never experienced war at the front themselves.

These notions and interpretations of the First World War were not decidedly contradicted by the ‘real’ war veterans. Although they might have pointed out that life in the trenches was not always so heroic, the veterans’ organisations could never agree themselves on an unequivocal alternative narrative or the construction of a collective ‘war memory’. Moreover, instead of inviting members of the younger generation to share and take part in the *Stahlhelm* or *Reichsbanner* discursive narrative about the war, the narrow definition of ‘war veteran’ adopted by veterans’ organisations implicitly excluded the ‘war youth generation’ and dismissed their wartime experience at the home front. Younger members of the *Stahlhelm* could join the *Jungstahlhelm*, but,

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*mentale Kriegsvorbereitung: Interdisziplinäre Studien*, ed. Marcel van der Linden and Gottfried Mergner (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1991), 125–140, here: 125–133; Krassnitzer, ‘Die Geburt des Nationalsozialismus’; Arndt Weinrich, ‘Zwischen Kontinuität und Kritik: Die Hitler-Jugend und die Generation der “Frontkämpfer”,’ in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 271–282; Ziemann, ‘Germany after the First World War’.

<sup>70</sup> Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*; Matthias Schöning, *Versprengte Gemeinschaft: Kriegsroman und intellektuelle Mobilmachung in Deutschland 1914–1933* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 187–192, 239–277; Jörg Friedrich Vollmer, ‘Imaginäre Schlachtfelder: Kriegsliteratur in der Weimarer Republik: Eine literatursoziologische Untersuchung’ (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2003), 4–61.

<sup>71</sup> Jünger, ‘Wesen des Frontsoldatentums’; Müller, *Der Krieg und die Schriftsteller*, 211–303; Schöning, *Versprengte Gemeinschaft*.

<sup>72</sup> Dirk Schumann, ‘Europa, der Erste Weltkrieg und die Nachkriegszeit: Eine Kontinuität der Gewalt?’ *Journal of Modern European History* 1 (2003): 24–43, here: 25.

lacking ‘genuine front experience’, they were not recognised as equal comrades. The official *Stahlhelm* narrative refused to recognise the war experience of the years of hunger, suffering, and nationalistic fervour during the First World War to members of the younger generation. Many disappointed *Jungstahlhelm* members left the organisation to join the sa. In the National Socialist fighting squad, they could at least count on being among their age peers and being taken seriously. The sa ‘offered young men the chance to act out their puerile masculine fantasies and play out their dreams of becoming nationalist soldiers.’<sup>73</sup>

With regards to the legacy and memory of the war, National Socialist ideology managed to absorb these discursive tendencies. Although the sa officers were indeed usually World War or *Freikorps* veterans, the sa rank and file never fought in the war themselves. Still, the war experience of the front veteran became a central topic for the collective identity of the sa. The Nazis successfully connected to the emerging front soldier myths and claimed that they and their political mission embodied the *Frontgemeinschaft* [front community], which in its turn prefigured the future *Volksgemeinschaft* [people’s community]. Rather than a memory or a half-idealised nostalgia of the ‘community of the trenches’, the First World War represented an active duty and a mission for the present and the future. The war dead became a moral and national obligation for the living: their former comrades and the younger generation, to ‘finish the job’ and safeguard Germany’s national mission and future. If the war veterans failed to live up to these expectations, the age cohort behind them had to take up the burden and remove the ‘dishonour’ of the Versailles peace treaty.<sup>74</sup>

After the *Reichsbanner* was banned in 1933 along with other social democratic organisations, only the *Stahlhelm* and the *Kyffhäuserbund* remained as possible opponents to the National Socialist interpretation of war memory and the voice of war veterans. Because both conservative veterans’ organisations enjoyed President Hindenburg’s protection, they were not immediately dissolved in the Third Reich. However, they were put under Nazi control and eventually merged into National Socialist institutions and organisations. Financial support and social services for the veterans soared, but they felt very much appreciated by state and society. Their positive image in the National

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<sup>73</sup> Donson, ‘Why did German youth become fascists?’ 339. Cf. Irmtraud Götz von Olenhusen, ‘Vom Jungstahlhelm zur sa: Die junge Nachkriegsgeneration in den paramilitärischen Verbänden der Weimarer Republik,’ in *Politische Jugend in der Weimarer Republik*, ed. Wolfgang R. Krabbe (Bochum: Brockmeyer, 1993), 146–182; Hoffstadt, ‘Frontgemeinschaft?’ 191–192, 201–206; Carlo Mierendorff, ‘Gesicht und Charakter der nationalsozialistischen Bewegung,’ *Die Gesellschaft* 7, no. 1 (1930): 489–504, here: 497–498; Reichardt, ‘Die sa im “Nachkriegs-Krieg”,’ 248–259; Schulz, *Ästhetisierung von Gewalt*, 181–188; Joachim Tautz, *Militaristische Jugendpolitik in der Weimarer Republik: Die Jugendorganisationen des Stahlhelm, Bund der Frontsoldaten: Jungstahlhelm und Scharnhorst, Bund deutscher Jungmannen* (Regensburg: Roderer, 1998), 80–83, 163–186.

<sup>74</sup> Sabine Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden: Nationalsozialistische Mythen, Riten und Symbole 1923 bis 1945* (Vierow bei Greifswald: sh-Verlag, 1996); Brandt, *Vom Kriegsschauplatz zum Gedächtnisraum*, 127–226; Hoffstadt, ‘Frontgemeinschaft?’; Schöning, *Versprengte Gemeinschaft*; Schulz, *Ästhetisierung von Gewalt*; Weinrich, ‘Zwischen Kontinuität und Kritik.’

Socialist front soldiers' state, in which the memory of the First World War, the cult of the fallen, and the recognition of national war heroes were central aspects, sharply contrasted with the political culture of the Weimar Republic, in which veterans did not receive a special treatment and esteem on a symbolical and discursive level.<sup>75</sup> Non-conforming aspects of their individual war experience, like the horrors of the trenches or the ardent wish to fraternise with French and British veterans after the war in order to ensure the endurance of peace in Europe, had no place in National Socialist war iconography.

The public commemoration and imagination of the First World War and the war veteran in heroic, patriotic, sacrificing terms, highlighting the solidarity of the trenches, idealising the values of the Imperial German army, and depicting the dead and the war disabled as moral incitements for political action against the internal and external enemies of the Fatherland, was in fact not invented by the war veterans themselves. The 'mythification' and sacralisation of the 'war experience' was strongly present among the 'war youth generation', was taken over by National Socialist propaganda, and became the commonly accepted public discourse about war and war veterans in the Third Reich. The fact that this was an ideological construct to convey a meaning and a purpose to the killing and suffering and the trenches and to explain the military defeat and armistice in 1918, does not make it a less powerful narrative than the 'authentic' war memories or experience of veterans. On the contrary, the Nazi version that the regime did represent the true 'spirit of the trenches' was accepted and supported by a majority of German veterans and incorporated into their own war memories.<sup>76</sup> The question to what extent this discursive process, this overruling of actual front experience by ideologically determined interpretations by the home front, contributed to the memory and commemoration of the Second World War in West German society after 1945, could be a subject of further research.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Cohen, *The War Come Home*; Nils Löffelbein, "'Die Kriegsoffer sind Ehrenbürger des Staates!': Die Kriegsinvaliden des Ersten Weltkriegs in Politik und Propaganda des Nationalsozialismus,' in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 207–225; Holger Skor, "'Weil wir den Krieg kennen ...': Deutsche und französische Frontsoldaten in der ns-Friedenspropaganda,' in *Nationalsozialismus und Erster Weltkrieg*, ed. Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2010), 175–190.

<sup>76</sup> Behrenbeck, *Der Kult um die toten Helden*; Krassnitzer, 'Die Geburt des Nationalsozialismus'; Löffelbein, "'Die Kriegsoffer sind Ehrenbürger des Staates!"; Sprenger, *Landsknechte auf dem Weg ins Dritte Reich?*; Vollmer, 'Imaginäre Schlachtfelder'; Benjamin Ziemann, 'Die Konstruktion der Kriegsveteranen und die Symbolik seiner Erinnerung 1918–1933,' in *Der verlorene Frieden: Politik und Kriegskultur nach 1918*, ed. Jost Dülffer and Gerd Krumeich (Essen: Klartext, 2002), 101–118.

<sup>77</sup> Herbert, 'Drei politische Generationen', 105–112; Gottfried Niedhart and Dieter Riesenberger, ed., *Lernen aus dem Krieg? Deutsche Nachkriegszeiten 1918 und 1945* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1992); Bruno Thoß and Hans-Erich Volkmann, ed., *Erster Weltkrieg, Zweiter Weltkrieg: Ein Vergleich: Krieg, Kriegserlebnis, Kriegserfahrung in Deutschland* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2002).

## Concluding Remarks

The research question with which this article started, the connection between German war veterans, on one hand, and the rise of National Socialism, on the other, must be answered on three different levels.

Firstly, the thesis of National Socialism as a movement of war veterans should be rejected as a myth on the level of individual memberships and affiliations. Only a minority of war veterans was active in the *Freikorps*, and only a minority of *Freikorps* militants joined the NSDAP or the SA before 1933. National Socialism was in fact mainly a movement of the generation which was too young to have active war or front experience, although its leaders did have active combat experience in war and counter-revolution. The debate about memorial culture in the Weimar Republic reveals an apparent discrepancy between the war memories and front experiences of the actual ex-servicemen and the imagination of the war by the 'war youth generation'.

Secondly, the level of political culture does reveal a militarised political habitus after 1918. 'Cultural demobilisation' did not quite succeed in Germany, the 'culture of war' persevered, and political disagreements were fought with the propagandistic fervour of religious wars. The refusal to find political compromises and build coalitions, the murders of political leaders, and the resurgence of street violence after 1930 were indeed important factors for the instability of the Weimar Republic, the increasing distrust of the general public in republican parties and institutions, and the rise of National Socialism. However, it was shown that the veterans' organisations were not directly responsible for this development. It is rather surprising that despite this extremely polarised and hostile environment in society, veterans' organisations usually abstained from openly siding with right-wing political parties.

The third aspect, the discourses of war and war veterans, is a much more convincing link between the First World War, war veterans, and the rise of National Socialism. German society of the time was characterised by a 'culture of defeat' but could not agree on one common narrative of the meaning of war and defeat. The repertoire of veterans' organisations did contain aspects such as pacifism, reconciliation, or activist 'veterans' internationalism' in cooperation with foreign partners or the League of Nations. However, these concepts were not very visible and effective in public discourse. By comparison, the political instrumentalisation of the concepts of 'war veteran' and 'front community' against the Versailles peace treaty and the Weimar Republic successfully incorporated the war experience of the younger generation, which consisted of heroic stories of bravery at the front and unconditional patriotism. The Nazi propaganda message that the war dead had not died in vain and that the younger generation had a heroic mission to fulfil to redeem them and the German nation, was in fact an extension of existing ideas and perceptions in the veterans' movement. Although the veterans' organisations cannot be considered as direct ideological predecessors of National Socialism, Hitler's movement could successfully appeal to existing discursive ideas, which were developed and practised in the *Freikorps*, and attached a meaning

and a purpose to open questions and concerns about the position of the war veteran in society. This marked success of Nazi propaganda on a discursive level can and must be recognised and analysed in its own right, in order to understand the relation between the First World War and its commemoration and the state ideology of the Third Reich.

However, this relation should be further analysed and deconstructed, rather than taken for granted. Older historiographical approaches assumed a causal connection from war and defeat, from Versailles and 'national humiliation' to National Socialism. These studies held that many 'disappointed veterans' joined the Nazi party and that the NSDAP was consequently a proper movement of former war veterans, voicing their opinions, concerns, and war experience from the earliest phase of the party history. This account does, however, reproduce elements of National Socialist propaganda about the First World War, the experience of war, and the role of veterans in the NSDAP. This problem is an important incentive to question and deconstruct the standard view on war veterans and fascism, to take a closer look, and to distinguish between actual war veterans, their representation by other generations, and public discourses about war and veterans which in the end, unintentionally, served the interests of a new political movement. The role of veterans in the crisis of the Weimar Republic and its poisoned political culture before 1930 should be reviewed critically, but cannot be reduced to the subsequent success of the NSDAP.

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'Milksops' and 'Bemedalled Old Men'  
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