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Compared repression in Occupied France and Belgium, during the Two World Wars

----- About Un-Civilizing Processes

If one refers to the two successive world wars, the first half of the XXth century stands out as an era of killing frenzy. It seriously calls into question the Enlightenment philosophy and its notion of an “onward march of progress”. A deep un-civilizing process seems to have affected the “civilized world” at the very moment it had gained supremacy on the “primitive” one. Both wars included a genocide, but the second world war was even more deadly: the losses were about five times higher and the proportion of civilian casualties grew dramatically. It reached the level of at least two thirds of total casualties. The significance of such severe civilizational breakdowns was not always perceived at the time. It is worth noting that Norbert Elias wrote *The Civilizing Process* while in exile, out of Nazi Germany. Published in Switzerland in 1939, his book hardly takes into account War World I and the Nazi state¹. Setting aside these heights of state violence is somewhat disturbing.

Can we put aside war violence when evaluating the history of violence ? Whereas street violence in France – whether that of demonstrators or of the police- has decreased since the XIXth century, war violence reached a peak in World War I. It resumed in 1939-1945, and restarted with colonial wars, from the very end of the Second World War. Centred on the French case, this scheme would not apply to Germany. There, street violence remained at a high level during the interwar, and the war violence which followed overtook all war violence ever experienced in Europe before. The German case makes Elias’s thesis all the more surprising.

Stemming from a work in progress related to World War II alone, this presentation asks more questions than it solves. It looks at a case of repression by occupying forces which is common to the two world wars, and uses it as an indicator of war violence. The acts subject to harsh punishment are the activities aiming at hiding Allied soldiers or aviators in German-occupied France and Belgium. Whereas these acts accomplished twenty years apart were quite similar, their repression, its intensity and its methods, changed considerably. The repression moved from a brutal but eventually regulated procedure, to a terrorist and un-controlled practice. We will point at some possible explanations, while remaining convinced that full understanding remains elusive.

What legitimacy for repression? The uncertainties of international law

¹ The German and French versions we consulted (Suhrkamp, 1988; Calmann-Lévy, 1973 / Pocket, 2008) reproduce or translate the 1969 edition : *Über den Prozess der Zivilisation : Soziogenetische und psychogenetische Untersuchungen*. Edition 2., um eine Einleitung verm. Aufl., Bern und München : Francke, 1969.

There is a certain relativity of the perception of violence, in space and in history. This raises the question of what violence is, and where we are to draw the line between legitimate repression, brutality and terror. The question has more to do with the means of repression rather than its principle. The repression of activities aiming at hiding soldiers who are enemies of the occupying power is seen as legitimate. The civilian providing protection is regarded as complicit with the enemy side. For the Germans, those civilians, men and women, were committing an act of war even though their only “crime” was providing food and shelter to the Allied aviators shot down over Europe. At the end of a chain of solidarity, these activities also included helping the airmen crossing the border to freedom or to a neutral country such as The Netherlands in World War I, Switzerland or Spain in World War II. The wide range of activities related to helping soldiers or aviators on the run left a margin of interpretation to the occupier.

International rules of warfare were not so clear either at the time. Germany as well as France had signed the international Conventions of The Hague in 1907. Article 2 of the annex to the 1907 Convention called “Regulations respecting the laws and customs of war on land”, stated that resistance of the civilian population to the invasion was part of regular warfare. Those civilians were given the rights of regular combatants. Arrested, they were placed under the protection of a Protective Power. And article 50 forbade collective reprisals.

Those articles, representing the minimal agreement reached by the signatory powers, left open many questions. In the case of *Art. 2* : What, if the invasion were to last for months, or even years ? If the invasion turned into permanent occupation ? With respect to *Art. 50* : What if the soldiers were hidden in the very home of the civilians ? Or sheltered and fed with the help of the whole family, husband, wife, children ? Were they all to be arrested ? Was the family group a case of collective responsibility justifying collective repression ? Was this particular case of Home Front liable to be the target of collective reprisals ? This array of questions certainly has to be answered by any occupying power encountering civil resistance. International law had not envisaged long-lasting wars and occupations. Strangely enough, this legal situation was left intact after the experience of World War I.

The perception of the repression by the Allies: from exposure to silence

“Monstruosity, teutonic rage, return to primitive barbarity, scientifically improved by the military Prussian caste”, in the name of “the so-called laws of war against the law of nations and the Convention of The Hague”...These expressions punctuate the texts of a leaflet published in 1916 by the League for the rights of man and of the citizen in homage to Edith Cavell, a victim of German repression. A British nurse managing a hospital in Brussels, she was executed for harboring English and Belgian soldiers, and helping them escape to the Netherlands. This execution aroused a wave of public indignation in Allied countries.

At the time, on the German side, the help provided to enemy soldiers on the run, even with pacific means such as shelter and food, was considered an act of “war treason”, and was punishable by death or hard labor. To be sentenced to hard labor meant, in addition, deportation to Germany. This concept of “war treason” was laid down in an imperial decree of 1899 which had not been repealed in spite of the convention of the Hague. The German Army had not transferred the articles of the convention into its military rules and codes. “War treason”, a concept contrary to the letter and the spirit of the international laws of war, helped the enforcement of a harsh repression.

Paradoxically, the Allies kept silent during World War II, although the number of victims of repression grew fast as well as the cruelty of the methods of repression. The exact figures are not known, but after the war, the Allies estimated the number of those who helped their soldiers and aviators, then called the “helpers”, between 20.000 to 30.000 for France and Belgium together. This is three to four times as much as the “spies” identified by the Germans in World War I. The death toll in the second war was much higher (more than 20 % of the victims compared to 5%), and those who were deported in 1940-1945 went through a much more traumatizing experience. The universe of Nazi concentration camps bears no possible comparison with that of German prisons of World War I.

Apart from executions and deportations, the victims of the forties, men and women, often had to endure torture. This was a new technique of repression. The stories of the helpers of the first war never mention torture, even if beatings of men and women were not infrequent. Some “third degree methods” were also used against allied secret service agents. But the reappearance of torture as early as 1941 in Western occupied countries may be considered a revolution in the repression techniques. An product of the Enlightenment, the abolition of torture dated back to the late XVIIIth century. It reappeared in the heart of the “civilized” continent and was not to be abandoned. Since then, it has been used by “civilized” countries in colonial wars of various sorts. The history of torture has yet to be written, but one may say that the mid-twentieth century constitutes a turning point, a reversal in the long-term civilizing trend of the XVIIIth and XIXth centuries. Among other factors, the developing of military intelligence policies linked to the expansion of nationalism among European and colonized populations may have triggered off that new form of state violence.

The change in degree and nature of the occupying state violence and the deliberate silence kept by the Allies during the second war need some explanation. Although there is an obvious parallel between the two wars, two occupations, two wide social networks of civil resistance and two brutal repressions, the discontinuity between the two repressions and the two sets of propaganda raises important questions.

On the Allied side, what legacy of World War I ?

On the Allied side, and regarding the specific subject of the aid provided to Allied fugitives, the first war does not seem to have left a significant legacy. At a state level, the memory of these activities has not fully been integrated in the war commemoration policy. The “policy of oblivion”², or of relative oblivion, must be questioned. Should it be confirmed, this interrupted memory would not fit with the theory of brutalization through war culture, at least on the Allied side.

The help given by the civilian population to fugitives was recognized through medals and ceremonies in France and Belgium after 1918, but as a whole, it has been buried in the global history of the war. This is especially true for interwar France, where the occupation of the North concerned a small part of the territory. No theorization was built out of this first experience of resistance. At the regional level, people spoke of “the French resistances” in the plural, among which one could find different items, such as :“aid and food to wounded soldiers to pass them to Free France”, “help given to allied soldiers to reach back the front”, “clandestine propaganda of French papers”, “printing of identity papers”, “organisations for

² John Horne and Alan Kramer, *German Atrocities (1914-1918): A History of Denial*, New Haven, Conn. ; London : Yale University Press, cop. 2001, XV-608 p.

the crossing of the Dutch border”, “intelligence work with carrier pigeons” , “counter-espionage organisations ». One can easily recognize the future activities of the next « Resistance ». But during the first war, Paris was the capital of “Free France” and after the Armistice, it kept this leading position on the nation’s collective memory.

There are also mere statistical reasons for the relative oblivion of the first Resistance. What do 332 executions committed in Belgium and in Northern France, and several hundreds deportees to Germany, represent compared to the 2 million odd casualties of World War I in those two countries ?

But interwar international politics also had a role in the matter. The Geneva Spirit and pacifism tended to clear Germany from the accusation of being responsible for the 1914 war, and at the same time, made easier the denial of the German atrocities committed in 1914 in Northern France and Belgium –6500 civilians killed from August to mid October 1914. This general trend hindered the forging of a resistance culture at the state level. During the interwar period, saying that civilian resistance had been strong, and praising it at a governmental level, would have somewhat legitimize the German theory of “Der Belgische Volkskriege”, the Belgian popular war, with which the Republic of Weimar used to claim its innocence and deny the toughness of Wilhem’s Reich methods of occupation. During World War II, for fear of being trapped in what then falsely appeared as a fabrication, -the “German atrocities”- the Allies did not expose the Nazi crimes. This was “the legacy of the pacifist turn”, as John Horne and Alan Kramer put it. This certainly explains part of the Allies’ relative silence regarding German and Nazi war crimes and crimes against humanity during World War II.

At a regional level, nevertheless, Belgians and French Northerners developed a strong resistance culture. Some helpers of the first war merely resumed their activities in 1940. This time, their deeds were met with a much harsher repression.

On the occupier’s side, the escalating processes of violence

Nazism bears the main responsibility for the acceleration of the de-civilizing process in the early forties. Nazi culture is in itself a sort of anti-civilization. The fruits of its coming to power were expected by those who had understood it. The purpose of this paper is not to discuss the obvious effects of the Nazi “Weltanschauung” but to study the concrete processes through which the occupier’s violence grew further without restraint.

During the first war, an international public opinion campaign had the power to stop or at least to slow down the enemy violence. This was the case after the execution of Edith Cavell. Allied protests and Belgian petitions against the executions of so-called “spies” had a certain effect. From 1916, the rhythm of executions stabilized, and the condemnations to death were no longer carried out in the last months of the war. This raises again the question of why the Allies did not launch an intensive propaganda campaign against enemy crimes during World War II. Is it their alliance with the USSR which made them cautious ? Or their own “strategic bombing” policy in Germany ? This could only be a partial explanation.

German violence was not curbed from the outside. It was not checked either by the Nazi state which committed direct and deliberate breaches of The Hague convention (1907) and on the Geneva convention on prisoners-of-war (1929). The violence of repression spiralled up, not so much in response to the concrete situation in Western occupied countries, than through a

contagion process which affected the helpers as an indirect result. In 1942, the Germans tended to confuse the soldiers and aviators on the run in Western Europe with the British commandos who fought the Wehrmacht on the French coast several times that year. Furthermore, since 1943, the fugitives were likened to the flyers responsible for the area bombing in Germany. As a consequence, the helpers in the West were more heavily targeted and repressed. To some extent, they had to carry the weight of the new warfare: seaborne and airborne raids and aerial bombings. No commando had landed on the Belgian coast in World War I and aerial bombings had killed some 3.300 Germans, as compared with the 300.000 to 500.000 odd victims of the second war.

The Wehrmacht as well as the Nazi Party intentionally implemented these infringements of international law. In October 1942, the Commando order (“Kommandobefehl”) authorized any soldier to shoot at paratroopers coming down to earth, and to kill the soldiers of any commando landing in continental Europe. This decision was reached in retaliation to the landing of Dieppe in August 1942 and that of the Isle of Sark in early October 1942. The year after, in August, Himmler gave instructions to the Police and the Nazi Party that the German civilian population be incited to lynch any Allied airman shot down over the Reich’s territory. “Lynchjustiz” was an answer to the four-day bombing of Hamburg in July. The instructions not to prevent the lynching was repeated to the local organs of the Nazi Party by Bormann in May 1944, and to the Army by the OKW in July 1944: “Soldiers must not defend terror-flyers from the population”. In addition, several speeches and a famous article by Goebbels, dated May 1944, directly incited the Germans to murder the “terror-flyers”. About a thousand pilots were killed that way on German territory. The Allies did not protest publicly. During the same time, an estimated 90 % of the Western occupied population was helping the flyers on the run. In France alone, more than 5.500 men and women were deported to Dachau, Buchenwald and Ravensbrück for this reason. No public protest against the treatment they endured was emitted either, in London or elsewhere.

There may be a link between Elias’s and the Allies’ discretion toward the multiple uncivilizing processes of the thirties and early forties. Their relative silence on the subject may have a common root in the belief in progress and in supremacy of the “civilized” people. It was not until the Eichman trial, in 1961, that Elias started evoking, in an unpublished piece, “the severe breakdown of civilization associated with the name of Hitler and National-Socialism”³. He noticed that the trial assumed “the character of a landmark”. “Like the two German wars -he then wrote-, it contributes to the growing mass of experiences which challenge the image we have of ourselves as civilized societies⁴”. One may venture the hypothesis that the time lag which separated the events from their full recognition is somewhat linked with “their incompatibility with the standards which have come to be regarded as distinguishing marks of the most highly developed societies of our time⁵”. The stupor provoked by Nazi terror proceeded notably from the fact that these modern acts of barbarity called civilization into question.

³ Norbert Elias, “The Breakdown of Civilization”, in *The Germans. Power Struggle and the Development of Habitus in the XIXth and XXth Centuries*, Cambridge : Polity Press, 1996, p. 401 ; cf. aussi Dominique Linhardt, « Le procès fait au Procès de civilisation. A propos d’une récente controverse allemande autour de la théorie du processus de civilisation de Norbert Elias », *Politix*, 2001, vol. 14, n° 55, p. 151-181 ; et Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, *Combattre. Une anthropologie historique de la guerre moderne (XIX^e-XX^e siècle)*, Paris, Seuil, 2008, p. 44-68.

⁴ Norbert Elias, « The Breakdown... », *op.cit.*, p. 301.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 302.