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# Capable of Dying, Capable of Killing. Questions of War Heroism

Christophe Bouton \*

THE starting point for this study is the critical analysis of a philosopher by a historian. Reinhart Koselleck defined the theory of history as the research into its conditions of possibility, and saw a framework for this project in Heidegger's major work, *Being and Time*. Heidegger's categories were still insufficient in his eyes however, and undoubtedly not realistic enough to take into account the conditions of history. He therefore proposed a broadening of what he termed "historical anthropology,"<sup>1</sup> primarily in relation to the following point. Heidegger argued that "authentic being-toward-death," that is to say, the finitude of temporality, is the hidden basis of the historicity of *Dasein*.<sup>2</sup> According to Koselleck, however, the "anticipation of death" must be related to the "ability to kill" or "the ability to put to death:"

Without being capable of killing fellow human beings, without being capable of abruptly bringing their life to an end, the histories that we are familiar with would simply not exist.<sup>3</sup>

Why did Koselleck think that it was necessary to complete Heidegger's being-towards-death with the ability to kill? We could consider in this matter his personal experience, if it is true that all thoughts on history

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1. Reinhart Koselleck, "Théorie de l'histoire et herméneutique," in *L'Expérience de l'histoire*, trans. Alexandre Escudier, with Diane Meur, Marie-Claire Hooek, and Jochen Hooek (Paris: Le Seuil/Gallimard, 1997), 185-93 ["Historik und Hermeneutik", in R. Koselleck, H.-G. Gadamer (Eds.), *Hermeneutik und Historik* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1987: 9-28)].

2. Martin Heidegger *Sein und Zeit* 74 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1986), 336 [*Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson. New York and Evanston: Harper & Row, 1962].

3. Koselleck. "Théorie de l'histoire et herméneutique," 186.

are rooted in a historicity that gives it a unique tonality. As a prisoner of the Soviets, Koselleck encountered the Auschwitz concentration camp in May 1945, an experience that he likened to molten lava coursing throughout his body and leaving a permanent mark.<sup>4</sup> Of course, this experience, however important it may have been, was not enough to justify introducing the category of the ability to kill, which itself has deeper sources. Indeed, Koselleck plays Hobbes against Heidegger.<sup>5</sup> He points out that the history of man, from bands of hunter-gatherers to atomic superpowers, has been marked by a fight for survival, always with the prospect of the threat of death inflicted by others. The ability to kill is not simply the confine of others, but rather it is present in every individual, and is particularly called for at times of war. It is in this sense that being-towards-death (*Sein zum Tode*) is also “being for putting to death”<sup>6</sup> (*Sein zum Totschlag*).

By taking the category of the “ability to kill” as our guide, I would like to consider the historical anthropology that underlies thought on history from the nineteenth to the twentieth century. Whether expressed in the classic form of the philosophies of history or under the more sobering theory of history, thought on history is based on a conception of man that is somewhat elaborated, woven from qualities that are supposed to intervene in the historical process, such as perfectibility, freedom, unsociable sociability, the spirit of sacrifice, or the advancement of death. Reflection on history is often inspired by wars or revolutions – “great events” that are one of the preferred subjects of philosophers. We all know Hegel’s famous statement that the “periods of happiness are empty pages in history.”<sup>7</sup> If history is essentially a history of crises and wars, the relationship that the individual has to death must be the cornerstone of all historical anthropology.

This relationship is dual, both passive and active: it is an ability to die and an ability to kill. The two go hand in hand, for in a war, he who dies is killed by another and being able to die means being able to be killed. And being able to be killed means being able to kill, because individuals are led, more or less despite themselves, to kill in order to win the battle or simply in order not to be killed. The hero who sacrifices

4. See Reinhart Koselleck “Vielerlei Abschied vom Krieg,” in *Vom Vergessen, Vom Gedenken. Erinnerungen und Erwartungen in Europa zum 8. Mai 1945*, ed. H.L. Arnold, B. Sauzay, and R. von Thadden (Göttingen: Wallstein, 1995), 21, cited by Alexandre Escudier, “Temporalisation et modernité politique: penser avec Koselleck,” *Annales HSS* 6 (2009): 1272.

5. Alexandre Escudier, “Temporalisation et modernité politique,” 1272.

6. Reinhart Koselleck, “Les Monuments aux morts, lieux de fondation de l’identité des survivants,” in *L’Expérience de l’histoire, op. cit.*, 137 [“Kriegerdenkmale als Identitätsstiftungen der Überlebenden”, in O. Marquard & K. Stierle (eds.), *Identität* (Munich : Wilhelm Fink, 1979 : 255-276)].

7. G.W.F. Hegel, *La Philosophie de l’histoire*, ed. Myriam Bienenstock, trans. M. Bienenstock, C. Bouton, J.-M. Buée, G. Marmasse, and D. Wittman, notes by N. Waszek (Paris: Le Livre de poche, 2009), 160. [*The Philosophy of History*, trans. E.S. Haldane (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1892-1896, 1995).]

himself sometimes has blood on his hands, especially if it is true that in combat, “giving your life is giving death.”<sup>8</sup> The categories of being able to die and being able to kill are the two sides of the medal on the hero’s coat, in which, if we are to continue with the metaphor, the ability to kill is the flipside of the medal. For what first strikes us when we study the classic philosophies of history in light of the category of being able to kill, is that it is eclipsed by that of being able to die and understood as dying for, or a capacity to sacrifice oneself. In the twentieth century, the situation became reversed, and the notion of sacrifice progressively disappeared to the profit of a stigmatization of the human capacity to kill other people. Koselleck’s work is one example of this, among others. The heroic anthropology of philosophies of history seems to have given way to a pessimistic anthropology. I shall analyze this reversal in relation to the work of various thinkers on history and war – Hegel and Clausewitz in the nineteenth century, and Freud and Sofsky in the twentieth century.

### *Heroic Anthropology*

If there is an aspect of Hegel’s philosophy that may seem strange to us today, it is the value he placed on war as a means of “maintaining the moral health of the citizens.” He argued this in an article on natural law in 1802-1803, and reaffirmed it in *Philosophy of Law* (1821):

In terms of finite determinations [...] as the winds which sweep over the ocean prevent the decay that would result from its perpetual calm, so war protects the people from the corruption which an everlasting peace would bring upon it.<sup>9</sup>

War is neither an external contingency, nor an absolute evil; it has its own need, which is that of forcing individuals to sacrifice their private interests, their property, and possibly their lives, for the benefit of the state, by protecting it from the sclerosis in the individual that threatens it when there is perpetual peace. With war, the primacy of the universal over the particular and the state over the individual finds its place once again. Hegel’s theory is not a legitimation of war in itself however. One does not go to war to heal the people of their stagnation into the particular, but primarily to defend the interests of the state. Concerning people who do not want to fight, Hegel wrote that “their freedom has died for fear

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8. I have borrowed the phrase from Myriam Revault d’Allonnes, *Ce que l’homme fait à l’homme. Essai sur le mal en politique* (Paris: re-edition Champ Flammarion, 2009), 147.

9. From G.W.F. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, 324, trans. J.-F. Kervégan (Paris: PUF, 1998), 401. [*Philosophy of Law in Hegel: Selections*, ed. Jacob Loewenberg (New York: C. Scribner’s Sons, 1929), 464-65.] Hegel quotes his article on natural law that was published in 1802. The comparison of peace with still waters that decay comes from Montesquieu, who applied it in relation to republics such as Carthage and Rome (*De l’esprit des lois*, VIII, 5).

of dying.”<sup>10</sup> This conception of war was inspired by the Napoleonic epic and the mass conscription that resulted. The lessons on the philosophy of world history nonetheless suggest that it has deeper sources. In the chapter on the “Greek world,” Hegel lauded the great battles of the Greeks against the Persians, which allowed world history to move on from this first period, the oriental rule of the spirit:

The battles of Marathon, Salamis, and Thermopylae have gained legendary status and will forever live in the memory of man. The small number of Athenians who fought at Marathon, the 300 Spartans led by Leonidas at Thermopylae, and the Athenians who took to the sea to fight the Persians, will forever remain examples of bravery. Since these battles, and since this time, many men just as brave as the 300 Spartans and thousands of times greater in number have also died. There is no population that has not carried out heroic acts or had numerous defenders, no homeland that has not been defended with bravery; yet of all these innumerable battles and men, of all the heroes who lost their lives in battle, none have the immortal splendor of Thermopylae and the 300 Spartans.<sup>11</sup>

Even if the splendor of Greece belongs in the past, the spirit of sacrifice that it demonstrated with these memorable battles is still alive and should be used as a model for the citizens of the modern world. A certain historical anthropology is presupposed here, which characterizes humanity in its specific relationship with death. Among the different possible attitudes to death, Hegel advocates the ability to risk one’s life, in which man is a being capable of standing up to the “absolute master” of death. This conception appears in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, in the dialectic between master and servant and within the chapter on the Greek moral world. Through war, the government must lead citizens to taste “death, their master.”<sup>12</sup>

In *Philosophy of Law*, Hegel describes “bravery” (*Tapferkeit*) as the capacity to overcome fear of death, emphasizing that this frame of mind has no moral value in itself but only in terms of its finality. Bravery should be an ability to sacrifice oneself for the state and nothing more. The modern state described by Hegel thus welcomes a “state of bravery” (*Stand der Tapferkeit*) that designates a permanent army composed of professionals.<sup>13</sup> The greatness of the sacrifice comes from the greatness of the cause, which guarantees the perpetuity of the action in the collective memory of the people. The memory of wars is above all a memory of all the heroes who sacrificed themselves for their state. Here lies a heroic anthropology. Hegel used the term “hero” for the “great men” of world history (Alexander, Cesar, and Napoleon are some of his favorite

10. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, 324, *op. cit.*: 401.

11. Hegel, *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, 407.

12. Hegel, *Phénoménologie de l'esprit*, trans. B. Bourgeois (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 209 and 295. [*The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977).]

13. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, 325 and 326.

examples), for the founders of states, and for the glorious figures of the past, such as the 300 Spartans of Thermopylae.

What becomes of the hidden face of the hero and his ability to kill? On this point, there is a clear difference between the Greek concept of the hero and that of Hegel. For Homer, for example, the ability to kill is one of the attributes of the hero. Ulysses, and above all, Achilles, whom Hegel sees as “the highest figures that were present in the spirit of the Greeks”<sup>14</sup> are formidable killers, whose bloody actions have been described in great detail. Hegel’s heroes are great for the fact that they risk their lives, or even die, but almost nothing is said of their ability to bring about death. Hegel glorifies the sacrifice and not the murder. Yet he refuses to condemn the murderous actions of the heroes, which are considered as inevitable acts of violence:

One should not therefore repeat that which historians usually say, for example: If there had been no bloodshed, Alexander would be great. We must do away with these discourses on blood and war when we are addressing world history, for it is there that lies the means through which the spirit of the world achieves its progression.<sup>15</sup>

Rare, however, are texts on the act of killing itself, as though it were covered in a cloak of shame. If it is not condemned, if it is justified within certain limits, the ability to kill is eclipsed by the ability to die. This can be seen in the dialectic between master and servant, which is a sort of original war on the individual state. For recognition to be possible, it is essential that neither of the protagonists be killed. It is a paradoxical, even acrobatic, war. One must risk one’s life without dying and without killing.

Has the capacity to kill completely disappeared in the shadow of sacrifice? Not entirely. It appears discreetly at the end of a remark in *Philosophy of Law*<sup>16</sup> (within a technical description of death), concerning the manner in which soldiers can kill their enemies. Hegel explains that the invention of firearms has transformed bravery by giving it a more elevated status, that is to say, by rendering it less personal and more abstract. Bravery should not be aimed at individuals, but rather at “a general hostile whole.” By allowing killing to take place from a distance, and so to speak, without hatred, firearms depersonalize combat and remove the passion from the ability to kill, but they also render it more mechanical and less heroic, for each individual is just “a link in a chain.”<sup>17</sup> In this analysis, the violence of the ability to kill is somewhat diminished.

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14. Hegel, *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, 367.

15. Hegel, *La Philosophie de l'histoire*, 423.

16. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, 328.

17. Hegel, *Principes de la philosophie du droit*, 328, Remark., *op. cit.*, 404. Condorcet was less prudent when he stated that: “Despite the terrible effects of firearms, by distancing the combatants, they have made war less deadly and warriors less fierce.” (*Esquisse d'un tableau historique des progrès de l'esprit humain*, 7th epoch [Paris: Éditions sociales, 1966], 173). Is it necessary to point out that the case has been the contrary? Firearms have multiplied the ability to kill.

We could give another brief example of the eclipse of the ability to kill by the ability to die in thought on war from the same period. Like Hegel, Clausewitz explicitly addresses the question of death in his treatise, yet he essentially views death as something that is risked or suffered by the soldier, and not as something that is inflicted upon the enemy. Indeed, Clausewitz insists on the importance of courage (*Mut*), which is the virtue par excellence of the “warrior genius.”<sup>18</sup> Bravery is the ability to face danger and to risk one’s life. It is either a permanent state that is derived from the individual’s nature, a disregard for death, or habit, or it is an emotion that is derived from ambition, patriotism, or enthusiasm. In this case, courage is fearlessness (*Kühnheit*), which is “the most noble virtue, the good steel that gives a weapon its sharpness and its shine” and that is “the mark of a hero.”<sup>19</sup>

In a situation of war, the capacity to risk one’s life is connected to the capacity to take life, that is to say, to kill the enemy. Death is common on both sides of the battle, and the ability to die is reciprocal, as is the ability to kill. However, it is only the first aspect of the mechanism – the voluntary exposure to danger – that Clausewitz highlights and analyses. In a short chapter on danger at war,<sup>20</sup> he describes the entry of a novice onto the battlefield. The closer he comes to the battle, the more he is overwhelmed by the roar of the cannons, the explosion of grenades, and the whistling of bullets through the air. He sees soldiers falling around him and the wounded and mutilated dragging themselves along the ground. But curiously, it seems that the young soldier never thinks of using his weapon. Death is presented in a passive form, like a permanent risk or a reality that is endured.

### *Pessimistic Anthropology*

While the wars of the nineteenth century were already very deadly, and involved their fair share of massacre, rape, and pillage, the twentieth century nonetheless marked a quantitative and qualitative leap in the destructive power of armies. The twentieth century, with its two world wars and its genocides, is the century of mass murder.<sup>21</sup> During the First World War there were ten million deaths, and during the Second World War there were around fifty million deaths, including almost as many

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18. Carl von Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, I, 3, trans. Denise Naville (Paris: Minuit, re-edited 1998), 85. [*On War*, eds./trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976, revised 1984).]

19. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, III, 6, 197 and 199.

20. Clausewitz, *De la guerre*, I, 4, 103-4.

21. Wolfgang Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante. Folie meurtrière, terreur, guerre*, trans. R. Simon (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 170. [*Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War*, trans. Andrea Bell (London: Granta Books, 2003)]

civilians as soldiers.<sup>22</sup> To give just one example from the war of 1914-1918, in the first hour of the Somme offensive on July 1, 1916, of the one hundred thousand British soldiers involved, twenty thousand died and forty thousand were wounded.<sup>23</sup>

This unprecedented historical situation contributed to the development of a new pessimistic anthropology, which can be seen for example in Freud's essay, which appeared at the start of the First World War, entitled *Reflections on War and Death* (1915). War does not in any way express the spirit of sacrifice at the service of the state that is in danger:

[It] strips off the later deposits of civilization and allows the primitive man [*Urmensch*] in us to reappear. It forces us again to be heroes who cannot believe in their own death; it stamps all strangers as enemies whose death we ought to cause or wish.<sup>24</sup>

According to Freud, primitive man had an ambivalent relationship with death, torn between the denial of his own death and desire for the death of others, who were considered enemies or strangers. Deep within man is a desire to murder (*Mordlust*), a cruelty that has been suppressed over the centuries of culture. The necessity of the commandment "thou shalt not kill" "is confirmation of the fact that we descend from an infinitely long line of murderers who had the desire to kill in their blood, as we ourselves perhaps still do today."<sup>25</sup> For primitive man has not disappeared; he survives unchanged in our subconscious. It is he who is freed by war, and this explains, in the eyes of Freud, why so many men engage in this unleashing of violence. This anthropology reverses the conception of man studied earlier; the ability to die is eclipsed by the ability to kill. Indeed, the subconscious is unaware of the passage of time and, by consequence, death. Modern-day man does not believe any more in death than primitive man. His heroism and his capacity to risk his life do not come from a clear-sighted bravery, but from an incapacity to take death seriously. Behind the demystified spirit of sacrifice lies a deadly impulse toward destruction that is always ready to satisfy itself.

The idea of a cruelty, an original impulse toward murder, can be found at the end of the twentieth century in the work of Wolfgang Sofsky, who is one of the last representatives to date of a pessimistic anthropology. In his treatise on violence<sup>26</sup>, he gives a concrete description of the invariance of violence in its different forms – acts of cruelty, torture, wars, massacres,

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22. See Marc Nouschi, *Bilan de la Seconde Guerre mondiale* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1996).

23. Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 143.

24. Sigmund Freud, *Essais de psychanalyse* (Paris: Payot, 1988), 39. [*Reflections of War and Death*, trans. Dr. A.A. Brill and Alfred B. Kuttner (New York: Moffat, Yard and Company, 1918).] On this text, see Marc Crépon, *Vivre avec. La Pensée de la mort et la mémoire des guerres* (Paris: Hermann, 2008), 5-18.

25. Freud, *Essais de psychanalyse*, 35.

26. Wolfgang Sofsky, *Traité de la violence*, trans. B. Lortholary (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), 189 [*Traktat über die Gewalt*. S. Fischer: Frankfurt am Main 1996].



and genocides – throughout the ages, from antiquity to current times. *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War* focuses on the twentieth century and analyses the specific forms of terror that have been used. What provokes the free use of violence? Sofsky answers this question with a particular conception of man that echoes the pessimism of Freud:

Taboo, the forbidden, and sublimation do not touch the depths of bestiality. Worse still, domesticated morality, which is supposed to replace this despotism, fuels the need to unleash it.<sup>27</sup>

Not only does culture not succeed in curbing the need for violence, but, by repressing it, it reinforces it. Sofsky rectified this argument in his subsequent work:

Fear and violence do not therefore come, as we often hear, from a bestial nature. We should not insult beasts, even wild beasts. On the contrary: violence results from the humanity specific to man that is capable of all types of cruelty.<sup>28</sup>

Man has an unlimited ability to kill. In this way Sofsky emphasizes the dark side of the hero, who sacrifices his life for the community by causing the death of his enemies; he accomplishes “the highest moral act – the sacrifice of oneself – in a mercilessly brutal gesture.”<sup>29</sup> His anthropology attributes man not only with a power to commit violence to a degree that is unmatched in the animal world, but also with a cruel nature, that is to say, a pleasure in shedding blood, and a fascination for violence. According to Sofsky, “killing has always been one of the greatest joys of the human species.”<sup>30</sup> That is why man finds pleasure in war. Without a passion for killing, wars would only last a few days. In “customary” war, violence is a reciprocal principle, death takes place on both sides, and one can both kill and be killed by the enemy. In his treaty on violence, Sofsky underlines the fact that wars are always accompanied by civilian massacres, a tendency that has increased over the twentieth century with strategic bombings and missile attacks, in a form of vertical violence that leaves no hope for those below. This kind of massacre involves “asymmetrical violence” or unidirectional death. The ability to die and the ability to kill are not present in all individuals, but are carefully divided into two camps: the victims and the killers.

From this perspective, Clausewitz’ theory becomes a prime target. Clausewitz defines war as an act of violence through which the state seeks to impose its will on another, a form of violence that he compares with a large-scale duel. We all know his famous definition of war as a continuation of politics by other means, in which cannon fire replaces

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27. Sofsky, *Traité de la violence*, 189.

28. Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 14.

29. Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 16.

30. Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 18.

diplomatic notes! Clausewitz' theory is that violence in war is never an aim in itself, but rather a means at the disposal of political will, for which it serves as a buffer. Sofsky, however, considered this definition illusory:

From the superior point of view of politics, war is above all a means of imposing one's will on the enemy. Once it is underway however, war quickly frees itself from any political or ideological aims. It creates its own conditions for perpetuation [...]. Violence becomes an aim in itself, and it itself creates the desire to kill.<sup>31</sup>

War creates a spiral of engagement in violence. So that the deaths are not deaths in vain, the survivors must continue the fight and die in their turn. From Clausewitz, Sofsky retains only the definition of absolute war as extreme violence.

Sofsky's pessimistic anthropology also encourages a more or less explicit view of history that is focused on the question of knowing how we can reconcile the idea of civilization with the recurrent unleashing of violence, modernity with a return to barbarity. Sofsky challenged the very formulation of the question. For him, the relapse of civilization into barbarity does not exist; civilization, like its counterparts of barbarity or savagery, is a myth destined to justify the violence of modern societies. In the history of the human race, there is neither progress, nor regression, for human behavior does not evolve. Humanity still has the same violent nature, and it has remained intact throughout the centuries of norms and rules: "Violence and cruelty are among the invariable factors of the history of civilizations."<sup>32</sup> They reappear at more or less regular intervals. If there has been progress, it is uniquely in the technical means of destruction, which render violence increasingly deadly, and civilian massacres increasingly numerous.

Sofsky's treaty on violence proposes a cyclical theory of history, in which it alternates inexorably between times of violence and times of order. Sofsky's theory is that the unleashing of violence, which is the result of invariable human nature, ends up exhausting itself and leading to a need for order. However, the establishment of order – through norms, repressive laws, and persecutions – in itself produces violence in the sense that it is instilled through violence and consequently fuels the need for violence. As legitimate as it may be, the violence of the state nonetheless remains a violence, all the greater for the fact that it holds the monopoly. The more powerful the constraint that is imposed on the

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31. Sofsky. *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 145.

32. Sofsky. *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, 74. The theory should be contrasted with the recent work of Robert Muchembled (*Une histoire de la violence* [Paris: Le Seuil, 2009]), which demonstrates a spectacular decline in violence in Western Europe from the eighteenth to the twentieth century, during which time the population's homicide rate dropped by a factor of 100. This possible objection is, however, limited, due to the fact that this enquiry excluded legal and illegal crimes committed during wars from its field of study.

“nature of bestiality,” the more imperative becomes the need to be freed of it, to carry out a new violence against the constraints of the culture: “In trying to curb violence, it [culture] reinforces the tendency towards it.”<sup>33</sup> The project of order is necessary, but it triggers, according to Sofsky, the infinite progress of violence. It is history that leads to violence and not the reverse.

For Sofsky, history oscillates between fatalism and pessimism. On the one hand, the cycle of violence and order is presented as inexorable: “Despite all the moral efforts, all the attempts at overcoming brutality, the evil is perpetual.”<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, it is always man, and always precise individuals, who torture, kill, and massacre. As a result, man is fully responsible for the violence that he carries out and is the author of what Sofsky calls the “black book of history.” What exactly is the value of this pessimistic anthropology? Should one really take pleasure in murder in order to kill a fellow human being? Nothing is less certain. Indeed, there are counter-examples to this. In many cases, violence is carried out in cold blood and without passion. Those who dropped the atomic bomb over Hiroshima were not all bloodthirsty killers. On this point, we could mention the correspondence between Claude Eatherly and Günther Anders.<sup>35</sup> Vertical violence, precisely because it does not see its victims, can be dispassionate, as with other distance killing techniques. It is doubtlessly all the more deadly as a result. But, one might say, this is not true of those who carry out genocide, which is concrete proof of the impulse to kill. If we are to believe Arendt, however, Eichmann (who was one of the key instigators of the “final solution”), did not like the sight of blood and preferred not to be present during the executions. The theory of an original cruelty is actually restrictive. Violence can also be carried out by ordinary people, driven by a range of different motives. Arendt reminds us that “assassins were not killers or sadists by nature; on the contrary there was a systematic effort to eliminate all those who gained physical pleasure from their acts.”<sup>36</sup>

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33. Sofsky, *Traité de la violence*, 189.

34. Sofsky, *Traité de la violence*, 201.

35. See Günther Anders, *Hiroshima est partout* (Paris: Le Seuil, 2008), 441 [*Hiroshima ist überall*. München: C.H. Beck, 1995]: “Eatherly has often been considered a hero. If he is one, it is not because, after his famous flight he left nothing of Hiroshima, but because, in the sad recognition of what he had done, he dared to cry: “Never again Hiroshima!”

36. Hannah. Arendt, *Eichmann à Jérusalem. Rapport sur la banalité du mal*, trans. revised by M. Leibovici (Paris: Gallimard, 2002), 208 [*Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963). (Rev. ed. New York: Viking, 1968.)]. On the question of the “banality” of those who commit such acts, see the work of M. Revault d’Allonnes, *Ce que l’homme fait à l’homme*, op. cit.: 25-39.

### *The Effacement of the Figure of the Hero?*

Whether the crimes committed by man at times of war are out of cruelty or blind obedience, they encourage a pessimistic anthropology. Man is an animal with unlimited power to kill. What becomes, then, of the ability to die and the spirit of sacrifice? Throughout the twentieth century, the martial<sup>37</sup> figure of the hero has been challenged, and is slowly fading, in the manner of the ghosts in Edward Kienholz' *Portable War Memorial*.<sup>38</sup> The hero is he who sacrifices himself for the community. As long as the finality of the sacrifice is considered to be legitimate and necessary, we sing the praises of the death of the hero and forget the victims that he left behind him. However, when this finality becomes doubtful, when the heroic vision of death is troubled by a feeling of absurdity, he is brought down from his pedestal and becomes in turn a victim of war. This effacement of the worship of the hero fallen in combat can be seen in Koselleck's work on the war memorials of the two world wars. After the war of 1914-1918, around a third of French war memorials evoked the concepts of glory, honor, or heroism.<sup>39</sup> The greatness of the supreme sacrifice justifies the remembrance of all those who lost their lives in the "line of duty." The war memorials for the First World War serve to remind us of the notion of "dying for something" (in this case, the homeland), but they often avoid the concrete phenomenon of death, which is rarely depicted. While dead or injured<sup>40</sup> soldiers are occasionally depicted, this is never the case for the killed enemy. The heroic interpretation of death in combat is left to the care of the survivors, and we can never be sure that the dead all shared this vision of things. In the war of 1914-1918, many soldiers might have considered themselves victims of military and political decisions, which placed little value on their lives.<sup>41</sup> The hero then becomes sacrificed as much as he sacrifices himself.

A small number of monuments represent a different view than the glorified vision of death. Koselleck thus mentions that of the sculptor Käthe Kollwitz in the German war cemetery in Vladsló, which was dedicated

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37. I use the term "martial," because the term "hero" is now blithely used to qualify artists, sportsmen, football players, and so on.

38. Found in the Ludwig Museum in Cologne, this piece, which was made in 1968 in the middle of the Vietnam War, involves five statues of American soldiers raising the star-spangled banner in the posture of the famous photograph taken in February 1945 at the top of Mount Suribachi. They are in a café, with the song "God bless America" in the background, and on the wall there is a poster saying, "I Want You!" Under their helmets, they have no faces and no heads.

39. Reinhart Koselleck, "Erinnerungsschleusen und Erfahrungsschichten. Der Einfluss der beiden Weltkriege auf das soziale Bewusstsein," in R. Koselleck, *Zeitschichten. Studien zur Historik*, (Frankfurt-am-Main: Suhrkamp, 2000), 281. Other war memorials usually just have the simple inscription "Died for France." See Antoine Prost, "Les Monuments aux morts," in *Les Lieux de mémoire*, 2, ed. Pierre Nora (Paris: Gallimard, coll. "Quarto," 1997), 199-223.

40. Like the very realistic monument dedicated to the students of the École normale supérieure de Paris who died in the war of 1914-1918.

41. Such, for example, was the attitude of the mutineers of 1917. See André Loez, *14-18. Les Refus de la guerre. Une Histoire des mutins* (Paris: Gallimard, coll. "Folio-Histoire," 2010).

to her son who died in combat in October 1914; it depicts both parents kneeling beside each other in mourning, their arms crossed and their bodies contorted with pain.<sup>42</sup> We could also mention the huge stele that was erected near Hamburg city hall in 1931, which is symptomatic of the ambiguous nature of death in combat, torn between supreme sacrifice and absolute pain. The front of the stele echoes the theme of sacrifice: “Forty thousand sons of the city have given their lives for us.” On the back of the stele, which is the other side of the scene, there is a sculpture by Ernst Barlach depicting a woman in mourning holding a young child tightly in her arms, a figure that the Nazis replaced with an eagle in 1938. It was eventually identically restored in 1949. And from that time, the memorial was dedicated “to those who fell” during the two wars.

In more general terms, the Second World War marks a change in the way that death was depicted by war memorials. It was no longer a case of glorifying the heroes and justifying the sacrifice, but of paying tribute to the soldiers who died in combat, and above all of keeping the memory of all victims, whether military or civil, alive. Koselleck reminds us that a large number of “those who fell” were civilian victims, as in the case of the bombings, and of course the concentration camps – deaths that were irrevocably meaningless, deaths that were *for nothing*. Thus:

In the Western world, we can see a growing tendency – even if it is not universal – to no longer represent death in combat as a question, and no longer as an answer but rather as something that is no longer the source of meaning and for which a meaning must be found.<sup>43</sup>

The political function of war memorials is no longer to worship the heroes who died for their country, but to ensure that there is “never again war” (*Nie wieder Krieg*).<sup>44</sup>

If we examine the situation today, it would seem that death in combat is no longer the price of supreme sacrifice, rather it has become “a professional risk” run by career soldiers or mercenaries: “None of them, fundamentally, are there to die, barely even to kill, but rather to work.”<sup>45</sup> Sacrifice has become the domain of suicide bombers who die in order to destroy the maximum number of lives.<sup>46</sup> The idea is gradually taking hold that the sacrifice of the self is legitimate if it is free of any act of killing – a “dying for” without the “able to kill.”<sup>47</sup> The heroes become those who risk their lives to defend a just cause, while avoiding any bloodshed.

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42. Reinhart Koselleck, “Les Monuments aux morts,” 149.

43. Koselleck. “Les Monuments aux morts,” 158.

44. Koselleck. “Erinnerungsschleusen und Erfahrungsschichten,” 276.

45. Frédéric Gros, *États de violence* (Paris: Gallimard, 2006), 224.

46. Gros, *États de violence*, 222.

47. See the short text by Levinas, “Mourir pour...,” in *Entre nous* (Paris: Grasset, 1991), 219-30 [“Dying for...”, *Entre nous: On Thinking-of-the-Other*, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. New York: Columbia University Press, 1998: 207-218].

The category of being able to kill raises a cascade of questions that we cannot pursue further here. To conclude, I would simply like to make two remarks. The first is that it seems necessary to me to qualify the pessimistic anthropology that has these days taken the upper hand over a heroic anthropology. Rather than talking about an “impulse to kill,” it would be better to speak, like Koselleck, of an “ability to kill,” and to avoid naturalizing the concept. Murder is a possibility for man, and not an inescapable necessity that is a part of his “nature.” Historical anthropology teaches us that the human race is ambivalent and unpredictable in the sense that it is capable of the worst acts of violence, just as it is capable of the most heroic actions; capable of an unspeakable cruelty just as of the most noble sacrifice. It must take note of man’s inherent ability to kill, without demonizing it or forgetting the other side of the coin – the capacity to die for others.

Whether we want it or not, Sofsky’s anthropology includes a more or less explicit axiological dimension, which is based on the condemnation of violence and the refusal of murder. His apparent fatalism hides an ethic that is turned both to the past and to the future.

Toward the future: the memory of the victims can be the basis of what Marc Crépon called an “ethical and political imperative” for a “common front against death.”<sup>48</sup>

Toward the past: Sofsky’s work also invites a “duty of remembrance.”<sup>49</sup> Is there not, he asks, a risk that the effacement of hero worship will take away with it the memory of the victims? There is a danger of forgetting the dead, of their being relegated to the past together with the rejection of war.<sup>50</sup> The final chapter of *Violence: Terrorism, Genocide, War*, entitled the “The fading of the horror,” ends by mentioning the different places in Germany – villages, quarries, and abandoned factories – where the concentration camps were located during the Second World War and which no longer bear any traces of the past. We can agree with Sofsky that the victims of the past must not be forgotten. This remembrance is all the more important for the fact that many of the dead do not have a grave, as we are reminded by the stele for the Jewish deportees of 1939-1945 in Europe’s first ghetto in Venice:

And nothing shall purge your deaths from our memories  
For our memories are your only grave.

Christophe Bouton

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48. Marc Crépon, *Vivre avec*, *op. cit.*: 142.

49. Sofsky, *L'Ère de l'épouvante*, *op. cit.*: 232.

50. This is the conclusion of Koselleck’s article, “Erinnerungsschleusen . . .,” 234: “Les morts disparaissent. [The deaths disappear.]”