

Sophie Body-Gendrot  
Pieter Spierenburg  
Editors

# Violence in Europe

Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

 Springer

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# Introduction

Sophie Body-Gendrot

How much related are present and past violence? The answers are complex due to the limited knowledge scientists have gathered, even after spending a life-time studying this very enigmatic and most serious social phenomenon called violence.

All authors agree that the present level of interpersonal violence cannot be sufficiently understood without taking the earlier long-term decrease into account. Ted Robert Gurr (1981, 1989) was one of these pioneers who undertook a statistical overview of the development of homicides from the Middle Ages to the present, looking at England in particular. On his curve, 20 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants were recorded in the High and Late Middle Ages and one case in the twentieth century put an end to the curb. Gurr interpreted this long-term decrease in interpersonal violence as “a manifestation of cultural change in Western society, especially the growing sensitization to violence and the development of an increased internal and external control on aggressive behavior” (Gurr, 1981:258). Currently, both the present and the past have to be considered in any attempt to answer the following questions: is the higher incidence of violence which still prevails a temporary exception or a new trend related to structural dynamics of modern societies? In which regions of Europe is it more specifically pronounced? More generally, this volume claims that historical knowledge of changes in violent behavior and of violence forms an indispensable contribution to an understanding of the manifestations of violence in contemporary societies.

This book is organized in five parts, examining contested definitions, long-term trends, contemporary trends, gendering violent practices and politics, war and violence, all contributing to elaborate historical and contemporary perspectives on violence in Europe. In **Part One**, two scholars agree that common definitions of violence are needed to work along the same parameters.

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In common-sense parlance, violence essentially refers to physical hurt and attack, **Pieter Spierenburg** observes (*Violence: Reflections About a Word*). Among scholars, anthropologists in particular feel the need to stick to this everyday usage, acknowledging that any intercultural comparison becomes problematic otherwise. All efforts of earlier scholars to broaden the scope of the concept of violence derived from a definite agenda. This is obvious in the case of “structural violence,” popular in the 1970s. This concept served to legitimize violent social protest with the argument that all unjust social conditions implied violence. Similar objections are in order against concepts such as psychological or symbolic violence. In conditions of high power inequality, they may lead to an intolerable confusion of sufferers and attackers. These notions are all based on the same implicit ‘logic’: (1) Violence is a serious evil; (2) some other evils in society are equally objectionable; (3) consequently, these other evils should be called violence too. But this logic being unscholarly, Pieter Spierenburg proposes to use violence in this volume as a reference to “all forms of intentional encroachment upon the physical integrity of the body”. This is neither an extended nor a too restricted definition. It includes a broader spectrum of interpersonal violence than that prosecuted under the law and hence it is not legalistic. And, next to interpersonal violence, it includes state violence: police action, execution and war. Hence it is independent from moral judgment and personal views of ‘order’.

“Violence is a multifaceted, socially constructed and highly ambivalent phenomenon,” **Willem de Haan** remarks (*Violence as an Essentially Contested Concept*). It is multifaceted because there are many forms of violence; it is socially constructed because who and what is considered as violent varies according to socio-cultural and historical conditions; and it is ambivalent in the ways it is socially sanctioned, legitimized and institutionalized, as well as culturally transmitted and experienced. Depending on context and perspective, violent actions may either be condemned and considered immoral, illegal and disruptive or admired and perceived as moral, legal and functional. Controversies occur and recur about both the substance of the concept and the scope of the definition of violence.

De Haan’s chapter explores the arguments for and against a restrictive or an expansive definition of violence, making use of Gallie’s notion of the ‘essential contestedness’ of concepts. It means that there are no conclusive reasons for accepting one definition and rejecting all others. For him, a proper definition should not be seen as a starting point for empirical research but as its temporary outcome. It would be more fruitful, he argues, to accept that definitions of violence are contested and that they vary depending on the specific contexts of discovery and contexts of justification.

“Violence has indeed many meanings and not all of them are negative”. “Violence is intriguing. It is universally condemned yet to be found everywhere. Most of us are fascinated and horrified by it. It is a fundamental ingredient of how we entertain ourselves...and an essential feature of many of our social institutions” (Litke, 1992:173). The latin root of violence, *vis/violentia*, refers to

strength, power but also to force and violence. The very act of coming to life is a violent act. Violence becomes dysfunctional when it is not controlled, channeled, contained by rules and laws and civil norms and when it becomes disruptive for social life in society. Robespierre coined the concept of 'progressive violence' in the French revolution explicitly for the pursuit of specific political goals. However, direct physical violence which will be studied here – aimed at harming, injuring or killing other people – indubitably stands at the center of the whole issue of violence, Peter Imbusch observes (2003:23).

“Violence always strikes by surprise. Due to its very nature, it exceeds our expectations, disturbs our modes of living, questions our daily life” (Ferenczi, 2000:15). It is superior to all other means of control and coercion and its impact which does not need explanation from the author is immediately grasped and is therefore highly disturbing. “We had secretly made the decision to ignore violence and unhappiness as elements of History,” French philosopher Merleau-Ponty wrote about World War II, “because we lived in a country too happy and too weak to even think about them” (quoted in Ferenczi, 2000:15). But the massive trauma of the 20th century have shown how such hope was fragile.

The combined historical and contemporary approach of this collection owes much to long-term trends in research on violence and three contributions constitute **Part Two**.

The Scandinavian case offers an excellent opportunity for exploring what use can be made of the study of long-term trends. The homicide ratios in some late medieval and early modern towns were indeed among the highest ever observed. Then a dramatic decrease in deadly violence occurred, starting in the 17th century, as part of a general European change. **Dag Linström's** chapter however reveals a more complicated picture (Homicide in Scandinavia). It is not altogether obvious that the level of overall violence followed the same secular trends as that of homicide. A more detailed analysis of homicide ratios also indicates a much more discontinuous development, with a number of mid- and short-term peaks. Moreover, several local studies indicate considerable regional differences, which sometimes are even more striking than the chronological changes. Regions in northern Sweden and in Finland reveal homicide ratios close to present-day standards during the 16th century already, and in some of these regions they began to rise, contrary to the general trend, during the seventeenth. Finland also offers a divergent development compared to other parts of Scandinavia from the 18th century onward. Whereas the homicide ratios continued to decrease elsewhere in Scandinavia, Finland experienced a rising level of homicide and it still has among the highest homicide ratios in Europe.

Since Scandinavian historians disagree on interpretations and explanations, the merit of Linström's chapter is to address complexity, to analyze the different theoretical approaches and to discuss interpretations relative to mid- and short term discontinuities, regional differences and the divergent Finnish case.

Court records have been used in a huge quantitative enterprise by historians. Implicitly assuming a perfect equivalence between legal norms and social

norms, researchers in the 1970s lumped all crimes and misdemeanors together as a single category of deviant behavior. Violence was not considered as a part of culture, as the product of a socially constructed ethic. Moreover, this quantitative history drew only a gradual line between crimes of blood and property crimes, considering theft and violence as mere variations of the same phenomenon. The ensuing confusion explains the neglect of the serial study of homicide in France. To redress this situation, **François Ploux** embarks on a new approach to judicial archives, which no longer confuses the history of violence with the history of crime (*Violence in France's Past*). In a new type of historical research, he attempts to recreate the social and normative environment of criminality. This transition from a quantitative history of deviance to a historical anthropology of violence is helpful to understand the social and cultural logic of homicide. His chapter reveals fluctuations of violence during the 19th and early 20th centuries, in particular an increase in rural violence after the mid-nineteenth. This temporary increase, reversing a longer-term trend away from physical violence, does not so much reflect a greater incidence of violent acts as a shift in the social threshold of tolerance. Consequently, in conflicts of honor, recourse to extra-legal solutions are less frequent. Making a transition with the contemporary period, **Ian O'Donnell's** chapter observes that, considered historically, the rate of lethal violence (excluding infanticide) in the Republic of Ireland reached a peak during the mid 19th century, remained relatively high until the beginning of the twentieth century and then declined until the 1970s (*The Fall and Rise of Homicide in Ireland*). During the 1990s, the level of recorded homicide rose sharply. This trend can be related to factors such as the economic boom, changing migration patterns and increases in alcohol and drug consumption. To illustrate these shifts, the chapter examines four time periods, each separated by half a century (1845–54; 1895–1904; 1945–54; 1995–2004). The level of lethal violence during each period is described and related to wider social changes such as those wrought by famine (1845–54), the emergence of new family structures and the search for independence (1895–1904), economic depression and mass emigration (1945–54), and the arrival of the Celtic Tiger economy (1995–2004). These phenomena are related to the civilizing process as it played out at the European periphery.

The continuation of this theme is found in **Part Three**.

Contemporary social scientists, without relinquishing statistical analysis, acknowledge however that the in-depth and ethnographic study of violent groups and their culture forms an essential source of knowledge. For instance, if in ancient European communities, violence was often accepted and sometimes viewed as desirable, currently this acceptance has diminished. Disrespect adds to the pains felt from unfair treatment in democracies claiming equality for all. Too much humiliation, too much disenfranchisement from the mainstream's values foster 'counter-worlds'.

Violent cultures are usually condemned by the public at large, because "violence emotionalizes, creates fear and can be politically exploited" (Heitmeyer, Hagan, 2003:8). That the majority expresses a rising sensitivity over violence is

evidenced, among other things, by widespread public concern over isolated acts of brutal murder, which are probably no more frequent today than in the recent or distant past. But such incidents receive ample attention from the media and are exploited by politicians during electoral campaigns. This is the case in present-day France where, as shown by **Philippe Robert**, interpersonal violence pervades public debate (*Violence in Present-Day France*). However, the use of this term is undifferentiated and vague. Scholarly work devoted to violence most frequently lacks the necessary accuracy. This shortcoming is due to the poor quality of the data generally used: police statistics. They overestimate the proportion and the growth of serious violence while underestimating the increase of petty violence which is underreported to police agencies. This inaccuracy can be overcome by linking several different data bases. The primary contribution of his chapter to a better understanding of the phenomenon lies precisely in the mobilization of various measures of violence which point at the current rapid growth of low intensity violence. Secondly, this growth is connected with the deterioration of social relationships within (and in close proximity of) relegated urban neighbourhoods. Contemporary cultures of violence belong indeed to insulated and marginalized spaces, where older notions and codes related to an honorable defense of honor have made a come-back. These codes have not returned unchanged though, as **Sophie Body-Gendrot's** contribution makes clear (*From Old Threats to Enigmatic Enemies*). The combined factors of ethnicity and race loom large in the discussion of violence. European countries have become more differentiated in the last quarter of century due to the influx of immigrants from former colonies and other non-Western countries. More recently, the trauma felt in the Netherlands after the assassination of Theo Van Gogh as well as the political consequences of the terrorist attacks in Madrid and in London question attitudes of tolerance for violent expressions of ethnic differences in European cities. If trust and loyalty allow the cohabitation of plural populations sharing the same public spaces, transportation, work, residence, leisure places in everyday life, after such events, negative stereotypes tend to amalgamate perceptions of urban risks of violence associated with idle male Muslim youths in relegated urban areas and with potential homegrown terrorists sharing similar ethnic profiles. The chapter questions whether it is legitimate for research to link these two issues. Who benefits from such links? Political entrepreneurs? Ideologues? Interest groups? Law enforcement agencies? And is there anything new in these endeavors? Are not victims more heard than before? Three types of European policies addressing new types of risks and violent forms of destruction are examined: policies securizing space and ignoring race and ethnicity; policies profiling ethnicized youth for their violent acts or potentially lethal actions; and policies of inclusiveness, participation and cooperation with Muslim leaders. Forms of multiple marginalization are then to be taken seriously by institutions. Even with low-intensity violence, risks of unintended consequences should be weighed carefully. Despite sophisticated technologies of surveillance and policies of prevention and repression, the core is never fully insulated from the margins.

Besides the links of ethnicity and violence, gender is also a central issue. Gendering violent practices are the object of **Part Four**.

A vast amount of historical studies led to the conclusion that ancient European communities often accepted violence and viewed it as desirable. It was considered as a defense of personal honor and, simultaneously, as a regulation of social tensions. Gradually and with a timing varying per country, this acceptance has diminished. During the last 15 years, historians have paid ample attention to the context of violence, including its meaning for the parties involved (with honor codes, rituals, and types of insult) and its perception by the public at large. In early modern Europe, violence was a ubiquitous part of sociability and, as such, culturally coded to an extremely high degree. Recent studies present physical violence as an almost exclusively male phenomenon.

The interest raised by **Dorothea Nolde's** work is precisely to address the question of gender-specific meanings and perceptions of both male and female marital violence through the example of France at the end of the 16th century and the beginning of the 17th century (*The Language of Violence*). As in other European countries, marriage in early modern France was embedded in a culture characterized by an intense presence of violence. The order of marriage, as one of the fundamental institutions of society, was redefined following the Council of Trent and in the context of nascent absolutism. In this process, the regulation of violence played an essential role. On the one hand, new limits were set on the practice of male violence. On the other hand, female rebellion and even more so, female violence were increasingly stigmatized, and the duty of unconditional obedience became the key element of a redefinition of the role of the wife. In this context, the symbolic as well as the communicative meaning of masculine and feminine violence is of particular importance.

From a contemporary view point, three associated contributors, **Kate O'Brien, Dick Hobbs and Louise Westmarland** pursue the theme of gender and violence and look at how it intersects with the working practices and occupational culture of bouncers within the context of Britain's commercially driven, violence fuelled night-time economies (*Negotiating Violence and Gender*). They examine violence work as gendered work by exploring how male and female bouncers differ in the way they perform and control violence within licensed venues. Blending together the findings of two British based ethnographic studies of male and female bouncers, they address the social and political context of women's increased participation within the sector of the private security industry and show that both men and women are commercially viable as specialists of violence. Control is achieved by the gendered (and sexed) body. Violence is instrumentalized and its potential is performed by men and women working in quasi-liminal environments.

**The major themes of Part Five** are politics, war and violence.

From one perspective, figures of homicide can be seen as clear indicators of tensions in a particular society. Thus they offer an often neglected, but nevertheless valuable source for social historical analysis. During both the First