Translated excerpt

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Räume der Gewalt

S. Fischer Verlag, Frankfurt 2015
ISBN 978-3-1000-4818-9

pp. 13-26

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Spaces of Violence

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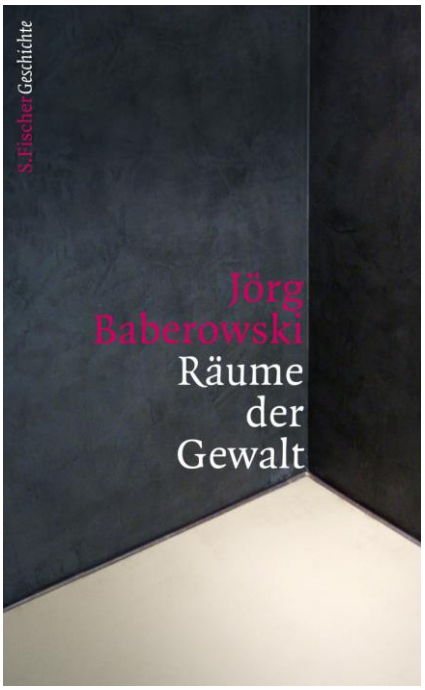

CHAPTER ONE: What is violence and how is it to be understood?

"The guerrilla war meandered and muddled along southward through the rain toward the capital," recalled the American writer Denis Johnson, who witnessed the Liberian Civil War in September 1990, and was never really expected to arrive. But suddenly, at the end of June, they were here. Taylor's bunch shut down the airport. Johnson closed in from the other edge of town, seized the capital, and isolated the president in his mansion and most of the president's army in the space of a few blocks downtown. . . . The citizens began to leave. Most British diplomats went home. All of the French departed. A half dozen of the U.S. foreign service remained, and the Marines set up machine-gun positions around the embassy. The electricity went off in Monrovia. The water stopped running. The food ran out. The civil war turned nauseatingly murderous. An atmosphere of happy horror dominated the hours as Taylor's men, dressed in looted wedding gowns and shower caps, battled with the army for the mansion. The shower caps were for the rain. The wedding dresses were without explanation. Meanwhile, Johnson's troops, wearing red berets and women's hairpieces liberated from the wigmakers, raced through the streets in hot-wired Mercedes-Benzes, spraying bullets. The people living around the British Embassy grew bold enough to ask Johnson's rebels not to dump the corpses of their victims on the beach there because of the stench. The rebels said sure, okay. There are miles of beaches in Liberia. . . . Most of the refugees left on foot, moving out of the capital into Taylor's territory and marching west along Liberia's finest highway toward Sierra Leone, streaming along like a crowd after a football match. In general this is a five-day hike over fairly level terrain, but it was fraught with difficulty because Taylor's rebels—boys from the Gio and Mano tribes, most of

them between the ages of eleven and fifteen, armed with AK-47s and M-16s—had dedicated themselves to separating out and killing anyone from the Krahn or Mandingo tribes, also those from the president's army or the former government. Thirty-eight miles out, in the town of Klay, refugees encountered the first checkpoint. "Do you smell that smell?" the rebels asked, speaking of the stench of putrefaction on the breeze. "You'd better know who you are," they said, "or you're going where that smell is coming from." Anybody who didn't speak the right dialect, anybody who looked too prosperous or well fed was shot, beheaded, or set on fire with fuel oil. Some of them were drowned in the Mano River. Refugees arrived in Sierra Leone telling of checkpoints fenced around with posts and the posts topped with severed heads. . . . The raping and slaughter of this conflict were no more awful than those of other civil wars, but a certain sickly inference seemed to draw itself out of them: Insofar as they were attached by the threads of superstition to the exercise of certain dark powers, these atrocities became inscrutable.[1]

Four decades earlier, in February 1944, Willy Peter Reese, a private spending his home leave in Duisburg, noted what had happened to him and his comrades a few weeks earlier on the Eastern Front. Abruptly the great symphony of war commenced and surged over the scene. We heard the denotations of the Russian artillery resounded back from the hills behind their lines. The shells exploded forward into our hinterland. The echo thundered, compounded itself into an elemental roar and went on resonating like a ghostly chorus. Then, the first impacts were heard in the little wood. Artillery shells burst with dull thumps; tank rounds and antitank munitions came whistling and howling and blew up with shrill crashes. Mortar shells shattered without notice. In between, machine guns were threading their deadly nets. The salvos of Russian smoke projectors came drumming toward us. There was an incessant shrieking, rumbling, whistling, wailing, and droning that swelled into a storm and went under in an endless rolling thunder. We

could no longer distinguish the individual discharges and explosions. This was drumfire. We sat in the bunker fully dressed with our weapons at the ready. Two layers of beams and few shovelfuls of earth were all that protected us, and still it felt like a relief from the crippling stiflement of waiting. The battle was under way, and the fighting couldn't be any worse than this overture.The bunker trembled and shook. Calmly we looked out into the fury, into fire, flying clumps of earth, and smoke. Black dust fountained upwards and came spattering down. A rain of shrapnel and frozen clay came down outside the door. Gray-brown, yellowish, black, and pale gray swaths of gunpowder smoke blew past. The vapor scraped our lungs and stung our eyes. Just as suddenly as it had started, the raging terror ended, passing again into our hinterland. The telephone lines were shredded, no runner dared to go out, but we knew: At this very moment the first wave of Russians would be charging the trenches in front of us. We hurried to the mortar, rigged up our machine gun. And saw them coming: in white winter camouflage, in groups and lines. Defensive fire began. We saw them fall, hesitate, and flee. An hour passed. The second wave also broke under our combined machine-guns, infantry artillery, and mortar fire. Then night started to fall. The dead lay a long way in front of us. The injured were crawling back. Our wounded were carried to the doctor. It was eerily quiet, except for the occasional shot, like a delayed echo of the noise of the day. By now, the fairy-tale forest had been transformed. The snow was no longer white. Rather, it was covered with a black crust of powder slime, trodden underfoot and mixed with dust, shrapnel, and earth, all of which meant that the once-white forest floor gave off nothing more than a ghostly glimmer in the early evening. The wood itself seemed to have been partially cleared. Piles of uprooted trees lay about, crater was planted next to crater, and the shells had sheared the frozen branches off the trunks. . . . The beauty and life of the wood had fallen victim to the war, just like the dead and wounded all about. We survivors,

though, loved the danger, which we preferred to the murderous waiting around. In this battle of materiel, life proved itself to be the stronger in an orgiastic desire to be. The war conducted us into a dreamy place, and men who otherwise were quite peaceful characters felt a secret yearning for horrid feats of endurance and arms. The primal man awoke in us. Instinct replaced intellect and feeling, and a transcendent energy embraced us.[2]

A year later, on the sunny spring day of 15 April 1945, British tanks reached the concentration camp of Bergen-Belsen. A few days earlier, officers of the British Army and with representatives of the *Wehrmacht* had agreed to a bloodless surrender of the camp and its surroundings. The camp was to be placed under British command, but the prisoners would continue to be guarded by the Wehrmacht and SS since a typhus epidemic had broken out. Evidently the British officers viewed the concentration camp as just another site in the prison system of a civilized state. For had they known what to expect at Bergen-Belsen, they never would have made such an agreement. When the first British soldiers entered the camp, they were greeted by an image of horror. "No description" and "no photograph" was capable of communicating it, remembered one medical officer. Rather, there was an infernal stench along with mountains of corpses in the barracks and in the open; emaciated figures in prison garb were crawling on the ground and searching for something to eat.

Yet Josef Kramer, the commandant of the camp, did not seem to notice how shocked the liberators were. Nor did he try to escape when the end had come. Instead, he greeted soldiers at the entry gate and led them through the camp, "without shame" or the slightest emotion, as one British officer recalled. No one was able to understand why Kramer did not flee, given the crimes that he had committed. But even the SS guards did not understand that the time for

beatings and killings was now over. As prisoners tried to force their way into the camp kitchen, Kapos started hitting them; several people were shot dead by SS men even thought there were already British soldiers in the camp. When officers asked Kramer why his men continued to beat and shoot at the inmates, he replied that it would not be possible to maintain order in the camp without using violence. When he was ordered to find some files in his office, he sat down at his desk and crossed one leg casually over the back of a chair. He still acted as if he were the commandant of the camp, talking about the difficulty of managing such a hellish place, as if it were utterly self-evident. For years he had been a commandant, first in Auschwitz, then in Bergen-Belsen, and now it was all about to end? He was irritated when British officers forced him to carry a wounded prisoner across his shoulders to the hospital and when they then put the handcuffs on him. Kramer was unable to grasp that he who had always been responsible for maintaining order was himself being arrested.[3]

The Enigma of Violence

Violence changes everything, and whoever is exposed to it becomes a different person. To experience violence is like journeying to a new world with different rules and different people. Here the standards of what is normal have shifted. In light of violence, what was taken for granted seems strangely alien, and what is extraordinary becomes a daily event. One enters a space of violence to learn that nothing is as it once was. The soldier Willy Reese writes that he would never be able to forget the excesses of violence he had witnessed. He had glimpsed the abyss of the human soul and felt the horrors of war with every nerve in his body. He had come to Russia from a realm of peace and prosperity; he left there as a marked man. Reese, who had been

a refined bibliophile, had become a different person once he had seen hell, murdered women and children, and mowed down enemy soldiers with a machine gun. To survive the war and save his own life, he had killed others mechanically and mercilessly. "Before long, I had no peace," he confided to his diary, "and no way back into myself. Memories tracked me like Furies. I kept reliving the terrors of the winter campaign, hearing the howling of shells and the screams of the wounded, saw soldiers charge and fall, and myself like a stranger in my destiny on the edge of no-man's-land."[4] Something similar also happened to the British soldiers. They were never able to forget what they had seen at Bergen-Belsen, and they attempted to fathom what might have made men like Josef Kramer commit such unjustifiable atrocities. They, who had seen war and felt the presence of death, could not understand it. It would have been easier to grasp if the commandant of Auschwitz-Birkenau and Bergen-Belsen or the Liberian president had been monsters or sadistic sex offenders. But they did not at all meet the criteria for what was ordinarily thought to explain the emergence of violence. Neither Taylor nor Kramer was a psychopath. Neither had been a victim of discrimination or violence. Neither seemed to have even been interested in political programs or ideologies. And yet at some point they came to accept as normal what most soldiers even perceived as a breach of civilization. How was it possible for Kramer and Taylor, who had sent to their deaths tens of thousands people, to believe they had been wrongly arrested and would be released just as soon as all the errors were cleared up? Had they not seen what was happening around them? At first glance, their case appears to be unique. The perpetrators were not seeing what others saw. Nor did they consider it unusual for people to be beaten or shot dead, their bodies disposed of like garbage. But how are we to understand that these men apparently felt nothing while we are paralyzed with horror when speaking of their deeds?

We take love and sexual gratification for granted, as basic human needs. They seem to require no explanation whereas we treat violence as an anomaly that has no place in our lives. Why is that the case? We could make it easy for ourselves and say: it is because violence causes pain and fear, at least in those who have to endure it, and because longings for violence cannot be satisfied without causing others to suffer. But that would be only half the truth about the disruption that violence causes to humans who are leading peaceful lives. We are irritated when confronted with cruel deeds that occur outside of our surroundings. For we live in peaceful societies in which blood and thunder are the exception, not the rule. We trust that we will not become victims of violence because we know that state power puts violent offenders in their place and that conflicts are not decided by executing the loser. So much do we trust these institutions and their unseen rules that we take it for granted that we won't be killed when leaving the house in the morning.[5]

But who still realizes that peace only endures because there are institutions that can enforce it at any time? To those who know nothing but peace and prosperity, violence is so remote that they experience it as a disturbance that should just disappear from their lives. Nor is it really a coincidence that violence, as a way to possibly assert oneself vis-a-vis others, does not make an appearance in Jürgen Habermas' influential theory of communicative action that itself reflects a post-heroic sensibility.[6] We believe our world is free of violence because it is peaceable. And yet, when something happens that is not foreseen in the everyday life of civilized society, reasons and motives have to be found that do not unsettle our belief that our peacefulness will last forever. We do not want to put up with the irritations of violence so we make do with those rationales that conform to the conventions of a pacified society. And we are so settled into our peaceable ways that we no longer understand anyone who is in a combat (or

similar) situation. As soon as someone exhibited pride, indignation, anger, or belligerence, laments Peter Sloterdijk, the therapists would assume that he was the victim of a "neurotic complex."[7] For the belief that violence is deviant behavior helps people in peaceful societies to imagine their reality as a space in which argument triumphs over aggression. "We disguise the catastrophe," says Jan-Philipp Reemtsma, "so we don't have to imagine our normal lives as permanently irritating."[8]

Reasons and Justifications

After the deed occurs, it needs to be justified. It is the perpetrators themselves who conceal the core of violence because they invoke only those grounds which allow them to classify their actions according to the behavioral logic of a peaceable society. Once the physical fights, rapes, pogroms, massacres, and wars are all over and violence is again outlawed, the only reasons that can be given that don't drive perpetrators or victims over the edge are those that make the violence seem like a temporary problem. Under such circumstances, people manage by making reference to noble motives, to what was necessary, so as to overcome the irritation the violence has generated. Perpetrators refer to superior orders, to practical constraints, or to the deadly consequences that would ensue if they had defied the order to kill. Some speak of higher values or ideas of honor; some explain that the victims' malevolence had left them no choice. What they did to their victims has to be rationalized to themselves and others. And when after the violence they are called to account for their deeds, they try to present plausible reasons so that everyone can understand why they could not have done otherwise.

When the rampages have passed and peace has returned, the violence can be designated as just another exception to the rule. For those accused of violence would lose all credibility if they were to admit in court that they had sent people to their deaths out of indifference, calculation, base motives, or for pleasure. Consequently, all the henchman of dictators and despots have presented reasons for committing such deeds, hoping to prove that what they were ordered to do had served an understandable purpose. At the Nuremberg Trials, Hitler's helpers also pointed out that they had been helpless in the face of unalterable orders. "But what could I have done?" exclaimed Wilhelm Keitel, former Chief of the Wehrmacht Supreme Command, in the courtroom. "An officer can't plant himself in front of his leader, the commander-in-chief, and disagree! All we can do is receive orders and obey them."[9] Adolf Eichmann, the coordinator of the genocide of European Jewry, told his judges in Jerusalem that he was only a cog in the big wheel, powerless to defend himself against that machine which forced him to carry out the vast work of mass murder. He claimed he had not been cruel but obedient, a faithful official and servant of his master, a person who did what he was commanded to. Hannah Arendt was taken in by this strategy of justification because she believed Eichmann when he said that duty was the guiding principle of his actions.[10]

Others who were never called to account for their crimes have maintained that their intentions were noble, that they were defending themselves against dangers, thus attempting to give an intelligible meaning to the extermination of millions. As late as twenty years after Stalin's death, Molotov was still proclaiming that the mass terror had been necessary because it preserved the Soviet Union against internal enemies, external threats, and general destruction.[11] Charles Taylor informed the court that sat in judgment over him in The Hague that he had no choice but to use force in order end the civil war besetting his country in Africa. What else could

Keitel, Molotov, or Taylor have said? That human beings had been killed on a whim? What would Willy Reese have said to the West German public if he had survived the war and been asked about his experiences? Would he have told them what he confided to his diary in 1944? There was only one answer, based on the constraints of the war, that still made sense even many years later: the horrors were justified insofar as the perpetrators could say they had been necessary and unalterable.

For the way that people act and speak depends on how they are expected to do so in a certain situation or space. During the Second World War, the British secret service had systematically monitored the conversations of German soldiers and officers in POW camps. Hardly any of the prisoners spoke about the war in the manner they might have in a court of law or in the presence of their families. They proudly told of their exploits, of war crimes and atrocities, because they did not need to have secrets from each other. Everyone knew that it had been customary in the Wehrmacht to execute captured partisans, sink enemy ships, and kill hostages. And they also apparently saw no reason to keep to themselves what they had done.[12] Even rapists, thugs, and hooligans will commonly speak about what they did only when they are among their peers. Once moral authorities appear to hold them accountable, reasons come into play that will not irritate civilized society. Violent offenders are expected to present explanations and justifications, even if they confess to their actions and the meaning given to those actions is incompatible with the principles and the self-understanding of bourgeois society. No one likes to hear that perpetrators tortured and/or murdered others because they enjoyed it or were bored. Or that they had not been able to resist peer pressure, thus doing something they would not have if they had been alone.[13] There are perpetrators who do not take responsibility for just one reason: a pacified society cannot tolerate perpetrators who *accept* responsibility.

We prefer that violence be based on reasons that can be understood. We prefer any statement that invokes goals and intentions instead of a desire for destruction. And so it happens that not only perpetrators but also victims try to impart a meaning to the violence they have experienced in order not to go insane. "Nausea is rising up in me," wrote the Leningrad painter Lyubov Vasilievna Schaporina in her diary on 10 October 1937, "whenever I hear someone say indifferently: 'he was shot dead,' 'she was shot dead' . . . This word 'killed' is always in the air, moving to and fro. People utter it in perfect calmness as if they were saying, 'So-and-so went to the theater.'" How is one supposed to get over that, that people are being taken from their homes and shot, apparently without any reason? "That for an entire night we can listen to living and presumably innocent humans being shot dead—and not lose our minds? And then we go back to sleep and keep sleeping as if nothing had happened."[14] How are we to cope with such things? Yet at some point the hour of explanation will arrive that gives a meaning to the terror. A Russian Jewish woman from Minsk, deported to a ghetto like thousands of other Jews in the summer of 1941, took her butterfly collection along on her final journey. Normality within a state of emergency. "People were looking for a meaning in what was going on," she said later on about her terrible experiences, "for some kind of common thread. Even hell is something that humans want to understand."[15] Anyone who has endured pain and experienced the violent deaths of friends and relatives will not be able to abide the notion that everything happens randomly.

Whoever violates such conventions of justification then becomes a monster in the eyes of his accusers. Before the tribunal, Josef Kramer played the role of a cynical receiver of orders, and he presented in justification only reasons that made no sense from the standpoint of the prosecutors and judges. It did not matter to Kramer who ended up in his camp, whether they were communists or Jews; *his* only task was to keep them imprisoned. Not even the Nazi

ideology interested him. He had only joined the SS because he needed the work. Murdering out of gratitude for income and advancement: that is what Kramer's defense amounted to. And when it came to murdering women in gas chambers, he spoke as if he had only needed to solve a design challenge. As soon as the gas streamed into the chamber, the women had "screamed." He had anything nothing else to say on the subject. However, he claimed that he had opposed a proposed transfer back to Auschwitz in 1944. The judge asked him why he did not want to return to his former site of employment, presumably expecting Kramer to say that he did not want to expose himself to its horrors. Instead, he answered: "I hated the Polish conditions there! What a mess!" He had simply not understood that it was useless to invoke Nazi morality as a defense strategy, especially when the victors of the war were sitting in judgment. Kramer had to answer for the death of tens of thousands. And yet he did not see himself as a murderer but as an incorruptible defender of the public order who had nothing to reproach himself for. Even in his prison cell he believed that the prosecution would realize its error and ultimately grasp that he had not done anything wrong. As he wrote in a letter to his wife, he hoped that his "phase of suffering" was ending and that he would soon be home again.[16] Kramer's justifications only made sense in the frame of reference of Nazi morals. However, once the dictatorship had ended, he just could not understand what he should present to the judges in order to be acquitted. He might have mentioned his difficult childhood or hardships such as being unemployed; it might have been more comprehensible if he had portrayed himself as a careerist, a fanatic, or as someone incorrigible or too easily seduced. Instead, he talked about the violence as if it were a matter of course requiring no explanation. To the judges, it looked as if the accused had nothing to present that could exonerate him. Kramer had to have been a monster; to his contemporaries, nothing else could explain his conduct. The British press labeled him the "Beast of Belsen." Only

someone who was a mental case would have been able to commit such horrors without having a reason. There was no other way to understand the messages that were being publically disseminated about this camp commandant in the post-war media.

Whatever violence may be, it is frequently presented as a deviation, an aberration, or an illness that will one day be cured. As therapists would argue: once diseases have been diagnosed, they can also be cured. All that is required is civilization, tolerance, or social justice. All the explanations devised by social and cultural scientists to explain the outbreak of violence are variations on these designs. Their appeal stems from a belief that circumstances can be monitored or created. As a result, the explanations and justifications given by perpetrators and victims are bad counsel if we want to understand what violence does with people and what people do with violence.[17] For whoever talks only about reasons and causes will learn little about the dynamics or intrinsic logic of circumstances of violence.

"Back then I'd already had an idea that is more deeply seated in me today than outrage over the enormous crime," writes Ruth Klüger, who survived the Auschwitz death camp. It's the awareness of the absurdity of it all, the utter futility of these murders and deportations that we call the 'Final Solution,' the 'Holocaust,' the 'Jewish Catastrophe' and more recently, the 'Shoah." There are always new names for it because the words break down all too quickly. The absurd, irrational thing is how easily it could have been prevented; no one gained anything from my dragging rail tracks instead of sitting at a school desk. And then there's the role played by chance. I'm not saying that I don't understand how it came about. I understand it quite well, or at least I know as much as others about the background. But knowing that explains nothing. We

count on our fingers what happened first while counting on the fact that something radically different emerged from it.[18]

In all stories narrated by historians, arbitrary events in time are connected with each other. Each event, they tell us, is caused by a chain of events preceding it. However, readers have become so accustomed to the conventions of historical prose and its presuppositions that they accept without evidence what the historiography of causation wants them to believe. We thus hear, “That can only be explained historically!" Why only *historically*? That is what Klüger is questioning in her memories of the horror. "Because each child has a great-grandmother, each thing must have a cause—which means that poor great-grandma unexpectedly becomes responsible for the mischief her descendants make."[19] But this does not make sense. For life is not a series of events that are causally linked to one another. It is made up of moments. Whatever may have happened earlier does not explain why in certain circumstances people kill other people. It could have all turned out differently.[20] There is no point in searching for the origin of violence.

NOTES TO CHAPTER ONE

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[1] Denis Johnson, “The Civil War in Hell“, *Seek: Reports from the Edges of America and Beyond* (New York: HarperCollins), 2001. 7-8.

[2] Willy Peter Reese, *A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War: Russia, 1941-1944*, trans. Michael Hoffman, ed. Stefan Schmitz (New York: Macmillan, 2005), https://books.google.com/books/about/A_Stranger_to_Myself.html?id=5_mstQIBuIwC. Minor adjustments have been made to Hoffman’s translation.

[3] John Cramer, *Belsen Trial 1945. Der Lüneburger Prozess gegen Wachpersonal der Konzentrationslager Auschwitz und Bergen-Belsen* (Göttingen 2011), 39 – 47; Ben Shephard, *After Daybreak. The Liberation of Belsen, 1945* (London 2005), 36 – 39; Eberhard Kolb, *Bergen Belsen* (Hannover 1962), 164 – 171; Derrick Sington, *Die Tore öffnen sich. Authentischer Bericht über das englische Hilfswerk für Belsen mit amtlichen Photos und einem Rückblick von Rudolf Küstermeier* (Hamburg 1948), 11 – 30.

[4] Reese, *Stranger to Myself*, 144.

[5] Jan-Philipp Reemtsma, *Vertrauen und Gewalt. Versuch über eine besondere Konstellation der Moderne* (Hamburg 2008), 13 – 23; Niklas Luhmann, *Vertrauen. Ein Mechanismus der Reduktion sozialer Komplexität* (Stuttgart 1968), 1.

[6] Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie des kommunikativen Handelns*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main 1981).

[7] Peter Sloterdijk, *Zorn und Zeit. Politisch-Psychologischer Versuch* (Frankfurt am Main 2006), 32.

[8] Reemtsma, *Vertrauen und Gewalt*, 22.

[9] Quoted in: Gustave M. Gilbert, *Nürnberger Tagebuch. Gespräche der Angeklagten mit dem Gerichtspsychologen* (Frankfurt am Main [1974] 2004), 12th ed., 32.

[10] Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem. Ein Bericht von der Banalität des Bösen* (Munich [1963] 2004), 194 – 195; Michel Wieviorka, *Die Gewalt* (Hamburg 2006), 153 – 147.

[11] Feliks Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym* (Moscow 1991), 390.

[12] Sönke Neitzel and Harald Welzer, *Soldaten. Protokolle vom Kämpfen, Töten und Sterben* (Frankfurt am Main 2011), 9 – 46.

[13] Siegrid Lamnek, "Individuelle Rechtfertigungsstrategien von Gewalt", *Internationales Handbuch der Gewaltforschung*, ed. Wilhelm Heitmeyer and John Hagan (Wiesbaden 2002), 1379 – 1396.

[14] "'Diese Inquisition!' Tagebuch von Ljubow Wassiljewna Schaporina", in: *Das wahre Leben. Tagebücher aus der Stalin-Zeit*, ed. Véronique Garros, Natalja Korenewskaja, and Thomas Lahusen (Berlin 1998), 346 – 347.

[15] Quoted in: Swetlana Alexijewitsch, *Secondhand-Zeit. Leben auf den Trümmern des Sozialismus* (Munich 2013), 227.

[16] Kramer, *Belsen Trial*, 233 – 234. On such scenes at the Allied war crimes tribunals, see also Harald Welzer, *Täter. Wie aus ganz normalen Menschen Massenmörder werden* (Frankfurt am Main 2005), 66 – 67.

[17] Cf. Jörg Baberowski, "Gewalt verstehen", *Zeithistorische Forschungen* 5 (2008), 5 – 17.

[18] Ruth Klüger, *Weiter leben. Eine Jugend* (Munich 1994), 148 – 149.

[19] Ibid., 149.

[20] José Ortega y Gasset, *Der Aufstand der Massen* (Stuttgart [1930] 2002), 79.