A Violent Past

Kyle Coughlin and Dr. Martha May

As the Clio editors complete this issue in the spring of 2016, Americans remain riveted by a tumultuous presidential election process. Rallies for Republican candidate Donald Trump have occasionally turned violent, with supporters and protestors clashing at rallies. Many Americans are asking what has happened to make our once peaceful election campaigns turn into hostile confrontations between angry citizens.

Historians would point out that this kind of unrest is nothing new in the United States. At the Democratic Convention in 1968, anti-war protests in Chicago led to what the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence later dubbed a "police riot," while inside the convention hall security guards roughed up an on-camera reporter. At the 1924 Democratic Convention in New York, supporters of the Ku Klux Klan openly fought dissenters, leading to 103 ballots before the delegates chose a presidential candidate. And as all Americans know, the 1860 election season led to the Civil War.

If it seems easy to condemn the bloodshed that characterized these political battles, historians nonetheless often struggle with the multiple meanings of violence in the past. Can violent responses be justified morally or ethically? Is violence inevitable? Why do some conflicts become violent, and others resolve

peacefully? The dramatically different events explored by the authors in this issue of Clio implicitly examine those questions.

Nathanial Walker considers the revolutionary rise of the Young Turks in the early twentieth century Ottoman Empire. In this case, the hopes of a revolution that sought to democratize, secularize and simultaneously unify its various peoples ultimately tore the empire apart and divided them instead. Its failure led to the violent Armenian genocide as well as the division of the Middle East, the effects of which are still being played out today. At the heart of this essay are questions about revolution, and how the goals of this revolution changed throughout its process. Why do revolutions often lead to results antithetical to their original purpose, leaving a violent legacy rather than a democratic one?

In a further analysis of the Ottoman Empire, Kyle Coughlin uses the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878 to shed light on the complicated nationalistic origins in the Balkans that eventually culminate into World War I. The historically hostile relationship between the Turkish and Russian peoples continue in tensions today; only last November, a Russian plane was shot down for crossing over Turkish airspace. Historians continue to grapple with the larger issues of why certain nations, such as Britain and France, manage to overcome their historically antagonistic relations, while others continue to hold on to them over the centuries. Of course, the issue of Balkan nationalism raises the question, once again, of when violence is justified and when it is not. Do groups of people who may perceive themselves as tied together by ethnicity, language and most importantly, a shared history, have the right to use violence in the effort to create their own nations or should a people accept that the circumstances of the ever-violent past oblige them to accept their place within a nation or an empire?

Finally, Phil Digby analyzes the emerging scholarship on the significance of wartime atrocities during the American war in Vietnam. He contrasts the writings of journalist Nick Turse and Vietnam War veteran Gary Kulik to reflect on the nature of the atrocities that occurred in Trieu Ai, Vietnam. Digby distinguishes between the official orders of those in the chain of command and the culture of the US military itself in Vietnam. This essay brings into light how war often brings with it a nonchalant attitude towards life itself, making the issue of the justification of violence more complicated.

The challenges of analyzing and interpreting these moments in history draw historians into a necessary examination of human actions, not simply as writers and scholars but as a unique category of observer. In *Regarding the Pain of Others,* essayist and author Susan Sontag pondered the role of war photography and art in informing viewers of the suffering inherent in violent conflicts. How do we see the images of soldiers dead on a Guadalcanal beach, or respond to the photograph of South Vietnamese General Nguyen Ngoc Loan shooting an alleged spy on a Saigon street? These and similar photographs become "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering," Sontag writes.[1] The history of our shared violent past offers us a similar opportunity to contemplate the ways in which violence creates or inhibits significant social goals and how it determines choices and limitations.

This may be a perfect time for us to look back to the role, the justifications and the significance of violence. Two years ago nations marked the centennial of the beginning of one of the deadliest and most politically complicated conflicts in human history, World War I. This year is the centennial of two very significant violent events: the Arab Revolt and the Easter Uprising in Ireland; the latter sparked the Irish War of Independence and the Irish Civil War. Next year will be

[1] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003),

the centennial of the February and October Revolutions in Russia, all of these events partly a result of World War I, a violent war sparked by a terrorist attack on Archduke Franz Ferdinand. And in 2017, the world will note the 500th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation, a religious revolution accompanied by the torture and execution of dissidents and war. In our own time as well, violence continues to be a tool that many are willing to use. In 2011, the world witnessed the Arab Spring, a series of rebellions and revolutions that spread throughout the Middle East, one of which is still going on today in Syria. In 2014, Russia had invaded and annexed the territory of Crimea in Ukraine after a revolution in Ukraine overthrew its president, while that same year saw the rise of ISIS (Daesh), a deadly terrorist group that has claimed over half of Syria and established a state of its own.[2] In 2015, ISIS claimed responsibility for an attack on Paris that killed 130 people[3] and very recently for an attack on Brussels, killing 30.[4]

As historians explore the reasons and the results of violence, we may provide some clues for the peaceful resolution of conflicts. Historians may also contribute to the debates over when and why violence may be legitimate. Whether right or wrong, it is very clear that violence is not going away any time soon and that is exactly why we must face these questions about violence honestly. Hopefully, this issue of Clio will provide a few different lenses in which to begin thinking about the issue of violence in both the past and present.

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[2] Maxim Eristavi, "How Ukraine's Parliament Brought Down Yanukovych," *The Daily Beast*, March 2, 2014. Accessed March 22nd, 2016. http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/03/02/how-ukraine-s-parliament-brought-down-yanukovych.html.

[3] Agence France-Presse, "Paris Attacks Death Toll Rises to 130." *RTE News*, November 20, 2015. Accessed March 22nd, 2016. http://www.rte.ie/news/2015/1120/747897-paris/.

[4] "Police Hunt Suspect After 30 Killed in Brussels." *RTE News*, March 22, 2016. Accessed March 22nd, 2016. http://www.rte.ie/news/2016/0322/776553-brussels-airport/