

[“Nerves and War. Experiences of Psychological Mobilisation and Suffering in Germany 1900-1933”](#)

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Conference Report

“Nerves and War. Experiences of Psychological Mobilisation and Suffering in Germany 1900-1933”

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Conference website (in German): <http://nervenundkrieg.de/>

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Nerves and War. Experiences of Psychological Mobilisation and Suffering in Germany 1900-1933 was the main theme of the international conference held by historians Gundula Gahlen, Björn Hofmeister, Christoph Nübel and Deniza Petrova at the Free University from 12 to 13 October 2017. The event was supported by the Fritz Thyssen Foundation, the Free University of Berlin and Middlebury College, USA.

Around 21 researchers from Germany, Ireland, Britain and the USA attended the conference. As **Gundula Gahlen (Free University)** emphasised in her introduction, the focus lay on contemporary discourses on the theme of nerves and war in the context of the First World War in the German Empire. She introduced the contemporary discourse on nerves as a central category for investigation against the backdrop of the changing understandings of doctors and researchers in the early neurological and psychiatric disciplines at the beginning of the war. “Nerves” should be negotiated as a cipher for identities, views and relevances that are systemic. In addition, nerves were considered to be a central mobilisation resource for the war and an endurance test in war. In order to make the most comprehensive statements possible with the cipher, the main focus of the conference lay not only on medicine and psychiatry, but rather located the theme in the broad socio-cultural context of military, political and social groups and individuals.

Against the backdrop of the First World War’s new dimensions of violence, the **keynote speaker Bernd Ulrich** outlined the significance of the nerves of traumatised soldiers as well as of the “home front” for warfare. The initial starting point was the nerves of the generals, which also failed at the start and the finish: the nervous breakdowns of General Moltke the Younger and General Ludendorff marked the beginning and end of the First World War. Ulrich classified the breakdowns of the generality as part of the respective commencement and disintegration of wartime society. This wartime society illustrated the special performance requirements of modernity and the psychological price which was to be paid for them, as well as the rapidly changing understanding surrounding how these effects of the war should be treated. The speedy restoration of the ability to perform was

required, using drastic methods if necessary.

Susanne Ude-Koeller (Erlangen) examined psychiatrists' contributions to warfare in the First World War, as exemplified by Erlangen psychiatry professor Gustav Specht's well-received inaugural speech "Nerves and War", given when he took office as prorector of the university and published in 1913. Specht recommended to "remove the mentally ill from the theatre of war as quickly as possible, or to not even send them to the front". Gustav Specht's psychopathological concept had a significant influence on the handling of the mentally ill soldiers who were treated in the Erlangen reserve military hospital. Specht was critical of common treatment methods for war psychoses and criticised therapies which were evocative of punishment. His belief in "inferior human material", which was more vulnerable to stress and psychological illnesses, was compatible with the subsequent politically loaded explanatory approaches of the post-war period, which were characterised by social Darwinism.

David Freis (Münster) discussed the concepts of collective mental illness in German-speaking psychiatry around the First World War. Discourses about a communal soul or sentiment and mass hysteria had already arisen long before the First World War. With the end of the war, these were construed as collective nervous breakdowns by renowned psychiatrists. With the aid of this development, Freis outlined the emergence of crowd psychology. He introduced the doctor, author and pedagogue Fischl Schneersohn as a little-known representative. Schneersohn's main work connected elements of modern psychology with Kabbala to create a humanistic model of society.

At the end of the panel, **Thomas Beddies (Berlin)** discussed psychiatrists' alternative conceptions of the defeat of the First World War and the November Revolution. Based on the idea that the demands of the revolution for equal rights and participation should be construed as moral weakness, inner strife and a lack of defensive will, new societal concepts emerged. These concepts recognised a way out of the crisis and chaos of modernity in the order of war. The psychiatrists mentioned by Beddies developed a "therapy" that was, above all, intended to ensure the conformity of the patient to such desired warlike, patriarchal ideals of masculinity. These ideals were seen as "normal", while anyone who departed from them was viewed as "pathological".

Annika Mombauer (London) covered the nerves of Helmuth von Moltke the Younger. The leading general's nervous breakdown at the beginning of the First World War, as well as his commands in the Battle of the Marne, were seen by conservative officers as the real cause of the defeat. In her talk, Mombauer sketched a different image of Moltke: that of a subdued and despairing quartermaster general, whose options for action were straitened by the Kaiser's unclear position and contradictory commands, as well as a lack of preparation. Moltke's nerves were marked by responsibility for millions of soldiers and the knowledge that he was not equal to this responsibility. This, however, was still an entirely different burden than that of the soldiers, who were directly confronted by the new dimension of violence and its consequences.

Gundula Gahlen (Berlin) also spoke on the theme of officers' nerves. Like the ordinary soldiers, officers too were directly confronted by the consequences of new types of weapons, their nerves too were damaged. These officers were treated far from soldiers' quarters, and their suffering was covered up. A nervous illness did not present an obstacle to either a continued military career or further use in the army. The privileged position of the officers meant, in particular, that physical and

psychological coercive measures were avoided when they had failed with ordinary soldiers. Trench warfare created new pressures for officers and soldiers: if the psychological demands sank, then the ideological demand for the type “front-line fighter” grew, which required, first and foremost, “stamina”.

Mark Jones (Dublin) addressed the escalation of violence and the role of word-of-mouth propaganda. He clearly depicted the difficult situation of Max von Baden’s imperial government, which initially tried to keep apart striking workers and officers, who were appalled by the revolution, and pushed for the renunciation of violence. Over the next months, though, with the employment of false reports and rumours, the stylisation of the striking workers as violent perpetrators was achieved, against whom one should and could take action with all means. The sole attribution of violence to the striking workers not only caused a massive and extreme increase in violence from the *Freikorps*, but also brought about a shift in the sympathies of the population and the SPD-led government from the victims to the perpetrators.

In his public evening lecture, **Joachim Radkau** discussed neurasthenia, the “nervous weakness”, which was the most frequently diagnosed disease at the beginning of the 20th century. He identified the letters of Max and Marianne Weber as a particularly rich source. Max Weber suffered a nervous breakdown and neurasthenia before he wrote his most famous work, “The Protestant Ethic”. Weber was to be found, too, on the militaristic and nationalistic side in the First World War: he labelled the armistice as a “nervous weakness” of Ludendorff’s. In closing, Radkau emphasised the importance for further research in this field of differentiating between personal experiences of suffering and introspection, on the one hand, and constructed accusations against third parties and external attributions, on the other.

The second day of the conference turned to political and societal perspectives.

Philipp Rauh (Nuremberg) spoke on the therapeutic approaches of psychiatrists around the First World War. An unexpectedly high number of soldiers returned from the battlefields seriously ill, they became blind or deaf, twitched, shook or became paralysed. On the basis of the Munich Conference of German Neurologists, Rauh described the controversies in the research of the time. He focussed on Manfred Oppenheimer’s approaches to traumatic neurosis. Although Oppenheimer’s theses stemmed from contemporary accident research, they were completely dismissed, as researchers were searching for therapies that would quickly restore the capacity of the soldiers. These included electric shocks and triggering suspended animation. However, these therapies were only rarely used in the practice of doctors in military hospitals.

Rebecca Ayako Bennette (Middlebury, UK) came to similar findings in her talk. The Tübingen military hospital which she focussed on treated soldiers with shell shock as well as conscientious objectors. This military hospital was led by Robert Gaupp, who was one of the leading psychiatrists of his time and an opponent of Oppenheimer. Although Gaupp rejected the psychological (trauma) impacts of neuroses and mental illnesses as monocausal, he did not practice any of the “new” therapies like electric shocks. Instead, he met his patients, including the conscientious objectors, with compassion. Gaupp successfully developed holistic therapies for “neuropaths” in the military hospital.

Christoph Nübel (Potsdam) focussed on the perception and varied negotiation of nerves in public and private spaces. Nübel negotiated the psychology of spaces and soldiers' experiences of the front as a separation of public space, to which the front belonged. These public spaces were strongly dominated by doctors and psychiatrists, and were morally loaded. The other spaces were more private, for example exchanges between soldiers, in which nerves and strain were treated significantly more matter-of-factly and with more understanding. The army leadership knew this, and reacted to it, according to Nübel, using various strategies. The biggest programs were the (public) propaganda with its focus on toughening, and the half-public and non-public with focusses on protection and healing. In this way, stated Nübel in closing, the expectations of the homeland and the experiences of the soldiers diverged increasingly until the end of the war.

Silke Fehlemann examined the nerves of the civilian population, the so-called home front. Alongside the multiple burdens of household, child-raising and work, the biggest burdens of the population were food shortages and grief. The gruelling wait for news from the front of life or survival of relatives became the most important subject for those who had "stayed home". Using contemporary women's journals and diaries, Silke Fehlemann described the rising burden on women and the pressure that they were put under. Despite increasing hunger and cold, caused by a lack of coal, the suffering of relatives was marginalised and especially women were told to not complain, but instead remain silent or even act as though they were living in an ideal world.

Continuing on the theme of gruelling waiting, **Sebastian Bondzio (Osnabrück)** turned to the death of soldiers, mass grieving and experiences of loss. The constant presence of death on the front caused soldiers to employ many strategies to cope with the death of their comrades. For those who stayed at home, the situation was different: they had to come to terms with the loss of a loved one. But fear for relatives was even more strongly felt, as Bondzio made clear. Although many died, in the households in Osnabrück that were studied, many more families suffered from fear for their relatives and worries about (repeated) loss after a trip home or stay in a military hospital. Grief appeared, according to this, as a construction, while worry and fear sustained the home societies' ability to fight for a long time.

Dennis Werburg (Potsdam) spoke about the *Stahlhelm-Bund der Frontsoldaten*, the biggest and most important defence association of the political right. The association was oriented towards the ideals of the imperial period, but became increasingly radicalised from 1924. It created a unique "front soldier ideology", which postulated a revenge war and a militaristic corporate state. As the "armed branch" of the DNVP (German National People's Party), it had much in common with the NSDAP, although the two also remained in competition. After 1933, the *Stahlhelm* became less important, until it was disbanded in 1935.

Daniela Gasteiger (Munich) also focussed on concepts of the political right. Nerves played an important role in the concept of power in the political culture of right-wing groups. If a person had weak nerves, they could not be a leading figure (*Führerpersönlichkeit*). However, the cult of the *Führer* was of central value to all groups. The "*Führer*", whether monarch or dictator, would overcome the collective nervous exhaustion, which was the cause of the defeat, and lead the empire into a new war, with victory and a bright future. The double coding with nerves and heart was a shared structure of the political right, which could also be linked to further meanings.

Nils Löffelbein (Frankfurt) presented a central element of Nazi ideology: the figure of the “pension hunter” and “simulator”. The insurmountable soldier’s bodily and nervous strength were important criteria of the German man, as propagated by Nazi ideology. The traumatised soldier did not fit in this ideology, and therefore only men with bodily injuries were used for propaganda. However, the majority did not receive support apart from propaganda. Psychological damage could even be interpreted as proof of bad genetic material (*Erbgut*), which could bring the men in deadly danger of forced sterilisation or euthanasia.

Jason Crouthamel (Allendale, USA) turned to the question of how the political parties positioned themselves in regard to traumatised soldiers and memories of the First World War. Social Democratic representatives accepted war-related trauma as an illness. In contrast, right-wing and, later, Nazi representatives labelled the men “hysterics”, who were fully capable of working, but simply refused to. Crouthamel analysed letters from soldiers to welfare offices and government representatives: “one no longer lives, and feels only seldom”. These were not considered in the debates and the men saw themselves as victims of the events of war they had experienced.

Olga Lanthukova (Munich) chose a literary approach, presenting literary narratives from contemporary authors. Ernst Jünger, the well-known apologist for right-wing ideology, glorified the First World War with “Storm of Steel” and ideals of masculinity like the strong-nerved soldier. He saw violence as a test of nerves and endurance. Karl Kraus, the critical but conservative publicist, chose the form of satire. His work “The Last Days of Mankind” represented critics of the war as “lunatics” before the doctors, who attempted to get them to affirm the war. Publicists like Edlef Köppen and Stratis Myrivilis positioned themselves even more clearly: they strongly criticised the inurement caused by experiences of violence like battle.

Julia Barbara Köhne (Berlin) examined contemporary discursive knowledge around war-related trauma and neuroses. As a central example, she chose the reception of Robert Reiner’s 1919 silent film “*Nerven*”. Dreams, psychoses, madness and severe psychological wounds appeared in the film, which mirrored the conditions of war and revolution. Fear, grief, disorientation, and mass discourse, as well as theories such as the unconscious, madness, psychosis, delirium and (day) dreams are also represented in the film.

In his closing comment, **Björn Hofmeister (Berlin)** summarised the conference discussion. He emphasised the political aspects of the conference, and the meaning of nerves and war for the National Socialist mobilisation for war after 1933. In particular, the mobilisation and rationalisation of nerves was a significant component. The instrumentalisation of nerves and will in the propaganda of right-wing parties and movements, as well as the role of psychologists and neurologists as experts for mobilisation for war, were characteristic of the first third of the twentieth century and beyond. While war hysteria was a symbol of the Weimar Republic, the Second World War stood for the unity, coherence and finally the nervous strength of the National Socialist *Volksgemeinschaft*. In closing, Hofmeister raised the question of periodisation and argued for a “long 20th century”, which commenced with the rise of neurasthenia in the 1880s and concluded with the end of the Cold War. To indicate potential directions for future research, the plenum collated a catalogue of research desiderata. Central points were: the close examination of the political left’s discourses on nerves, the transfer of knowledge between and interconnection of military, society, military medicine and civil psychotherapy, and the learning processes connected with this, as well as the meaning of “nerves”

for women and children in general.