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The Ambiguity of the Good. German Professors in the “War of the Minds”

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The German scholars' attitude toward the Great War has usually been the object of much criticism. Most historians specifically stress the part the professors played in mobilising the nation and in conveying xenophobic prejudices. To name but one example: Kurt Flasch, philosopher and historian who taught in Bochum, observed a rabid nationalism and a considerable collection of anti-western resentments among the German professors.¹ This, however, is a somewhat broad-brush assessment that not only fails to acknowledge the international dimension of the propaganda-war but also misconceives the way the protagonists saw themselves. Furthermore, a lopsided condemnation of the once so very common Metaphysics of Germanism (“Deutschtumsmetaphysik”) would only serve to petrify contemporary prejudices – or to perpetuate them under reversed preconditions.²

This paper intends to call into question the established view of the “War of the Minds” (Krieg der Geister) and advocates a widely contextualised approach, analysing these phenomena within the history of ideas. This seems especially advisable since during war times the scholars did not adhere to meticulously crafted arguments but tended to resort to rallying cries and grave stylisations.³ Accordingly, we historians find ourselves in the difficult position of having to devise hermeneutics for a group of texts that in their hermetic style seem to almost actively resist any straightforward interpretation. Hence, it is all the more important to elucidate the reception history. Before we are able to assess the actual effect of this world-war-literature, at least to a reasonably realistic degree, we need to acquire detailed knowledge on print runs, censorship, and distribution area.⁴

I would like to deal with three texts that are seen as the epitome of nationalistic bigotry. Firstly, there is Ernst Lissauer's “Hymn of Hate against England”, the Hassgesang gegen England. At first glance there is no denying its aggressive rhetoric or its wide-spread impact (I). Secondly, I shall analyse the “Manifesto of the Ninety-three”; signed by distinguished scientists and writers the text had been intended to evoke international sympathy, but was immediately considered an expression of Germany's overestimation of itself (II). Thirdly, I will look into Werner Sombart's pamphlet “Merchants and Heroes” (Händler und Helden) that more than any other text shapes today's view of German professorial war-literature (III). Finally, I shall pose the question of what price we are actually paying for our clear-cut picture of the “War of the Minds” and I will outline ways of overcoming it (IV).

I

Ernst Lissauer, author of the “Hymn of Hate against England”, was part of the assimilated German Jewry. His father, Hugo Lissauer, died in 1910 as a rich silk merchant in Berlin. He was a well respected man and led the proud title “Kommerzienrat”. Like many other members of his generation Ernst Lissauer, born in 1882, took advantage of his father's property to follow his own intellectual interests. He became a famous lyricist. However, in contrast to many

of his contemporaries he possessed a very conservative worldview and saw in the preservation of German culture an indispensable condition for a prosperous future. Moreover, he proposed strongly in the large Jewish debate of 1912, that the Jews had to go up in the German nation: “*Only two things are possible: either to emigrate, or to be German.* But then: Dig, take root with all strength, with all the veins, all the muscles, educate yourself to become German, make the German case a case of your own”⁵ As might be expected in August 1914 Lissauer identified himself with the German nation which he saw surrounded by envious enemies. Britain’s entry into the war in 1914 on the side of the Entente he regarded as unforgivable betrayal and as an attack on the highest cultural values embodied by Germany.

In September 1914, right after it had been published somewhat out-of-the-way, the “Hymn of Hate against England” met with great public interest. The ponderous poem was regarded as an authentic expression of German indignation over Great Britain’s treasonable behaviour at the outbreak of war. Its most famous lines may serve to illustrate the paramount importance of its ideological message as well as its unassuming poetry:

“We will never forego our hate,
We have all but a single hate,
We love as one, we hate as one,
We have one foe and one alone -
England!”⁶

After all, with his poem Lissauer had expressed a widespread attitude in Germany. In his “World of Yesterday” (*Die Welt von Gestern*) Stefan Zweig even talks of “the Hymn of Hatred” as “a bombe which had fallen into an ammunition depot”.⁷ This might be an exaggeration, but it is undeniable that the poem of Lissauer very quickly gained enormous popularity.

Admired by the Emperor the “Hymn of Hate” shaped life at the home front and the greeting “May God punish England” (*Gott strafe England*) answered by “So be it” (*Er strafe es*) could be heard at many a street corner during the first months of war. Nothing much changed when it came to light that the author was an assimilated Berlin Jew. The Emperor awarded Lissauer the Order of the Red Eagle, with ribbon, and together with the crown prince of Bavaria he ensured that the poem was widely circulated within the military.⁸ The Pan-German’s stream of spiteful invective against Lissauer’s Jewishness, however, played only a minor role.

Nevertheless, the “Hymn of Hate” failed to have a lasting effect. This was largely due to the German *Bildungsbürgertum*, the academic middle classes, whose views and attitudes basically constituted public opinion. The *Bildungsbürgertum* firmly believed that the Central Powers were leading a war for human ideals and hence, as a matter of principle, it disapproved of demonising the military enemy. Influential Jewish intellectuals went even a step further. The journalist Benjamin Segel interviewed sixty opinion leaders among the German Jewry and merely one of them regarded the “Hymn of Hate” as genuinely “Jewish”.⁹ It was common ground that universal ethical values were of higher importance than vilifying the major enemy, which England was doubtlessly considered to be.

While the war continued, Lissauer soon found himself among the undesirables, because his patriotic poetry allegedly denied the “chivalrous character of German culture”. This was a remarkably one-sided appraisal of matters, its effect not only equal to an ostracism but also grist for the anti-Semites’ mill. But it supplied a scapegoat for the disastrous image of Germany among the Entente Powers that was considered to be in need of an explanation. Lissauer also

became the victim of an anti-Semitic smear campaign, because his extreme nationalistic political thoughts were quite uncommon among liberal German Jews. Most members of the educated middle-classes preferred an idealistic understanding of German culture, as it was cultivated in schools and universities. Exactly how highly the German Bildungsbürgertum thought of itself can be gleaned from the “Appeal to the Cultural World”, published on October 4th 1914. Its signatories, all 93 of them eminent intellectuals, had hoped to promote the “German cause”.

II

Employing a prose consciously reminiscent of Luther’s Theses the “Manifesto of the Ninety-three” confronted allied propaganda. William II. was no Attila but a prince of peace, who in his reign of now 26 years had time and again proven his fair-mindedness. Claims of war crimes committed in Belgium were unwarranted; its neutrality had to be sacrificed for the sake of the German Nation’s right to life. “German militarism”, moreover, was an honorary title, without it “German civilization would long since have been extirpated”. In contrast, the deceitfulness of England and France was clearly visible considering that they had allied themselves with unjust states such as Russia and Serbia and that they were inciting the indigenous people of their colonies “against the white race”.¹⁰

Because of the manifesto’s drastic diction, historians have for a long time held the nationalistic right responsible for it. Fritz Fischer deemed Ulrich von Wilamowitz Moellendorf the author, Prussian nobleman and conservative scholar of Greek antiquity. In actual fact, however, the world famous Berlin professor had merely adorned the manifesto with his signature.¹¹ Its origins can be pinpointed to the liberal left that at the turn of the century had so vehemently opposed the Emperor’s backward cultural policy. Ludwig Fulda, chairman of the Berlin Goethe Federation (Goethebund), had written the first draft and Hermann Suderman, a naturalistic writer, contributed several key arguments. Some artists like the painter Max Liebermann or the writer Gerhart Hauptmann, who had been famous in Germany for decades signed the manifesto. Even more remarkable was its resonance among Germany’s scholars.

In the humanities a lot of well respected professors signed the manifesto.¹² Besides the famous theologian and President of the Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gesellschaft, Adolf von Harnack, the philosophers Rudolf Eucken, Wilhelm Windelband und Max Wundt were among the signatories as well as the economists Lujo Brentano and Gustav Schmoller. Even the scientists were not restrained: together with the Marburg professor Emil von Behring, the first winner of the Nobel Prize in medicine in 1901, some world-famous scholars like Paul Ehrlich, Fritz Haber, Emil Fischer or Conrad Röntgen gave their signature. All of them gained the Nobel Prize: Fritz Haber, although he was accused by the Entente States to be the main responsible for the use of poison gas in the war, at last in 1918.¹³

A pacifist view like Albert Einstein was not very common in the academic world. The confession was widespread, that it was the duty of everybody to defend the homeland in case of emergency.¹⁴ Most of the professors who had signed the “Manifesto of the Ninety-three” were politically not conservative but were generally sympathetic either to the liberal left or the national liberal parties. There is no doubt at their willingness, to stand up to their country, but they had not wasted a single thought on the preconditions of successful propaganda.

Immediately the manifesto was translated into ten languages but given the strength of the German military apparatus its impact was disastrous. Within the Entente and the neutral states it seemed inconceivable how scholars far away from the front-lines would know anything noteworthy about atrocities committed by the German army in Belgium. The manifesto’s tone of voice was considered presumptuous. This especially applied to the airiness the authors exhibited when citing “the legacy of a Goethe, a Beethoven, and a Kant” to vindicate current events.¹⁵ Criticising

these philosophical embellishments of political interests was instantly plausible and still meets with approval today. Without adequate interpretation of historical circumstances, however, this criticism threatens to obscure significant dimensions of the mesh of events.

The aggressive character as well as the professionalism of allied propaganda were both crucial stimulants for the scholarly over-identification with German culture. There is, for one, Henri Bergson's powerfully eloquent statement of August 8th. He glorified the inner unity of the French nation and called to arms for a battle of "civilisation" against "barbarism".¹⁶ Furthermore there is the British press stylising the Germans as "Huns". The Times, until then rather Germanophile, particularly favoured this second stereotype and it also proved very suitable for visualisations.¹⁷ Even today it still has lost nothing of its potency. The German professors and their anti-British propaganda failed to achieve a similar success.

However, this does not mean that one should think of a "special path in German history of ideas" (deutschen Sonderweg in der Ideengeschichte) during World War One. This position neglects the fact that the propaganda war was an international event. It was important to refute the opposing arguments and to advertise the own view. Moreover, the idea of a "special path in German history" (deutsche Sonderweg) favoured precisely those glorification of a "German character", which the idea itself tries to damage. At last this leads to bold assumptions of continuity which to substantiate empirically is nearly impossible. Sometimes they try to show a direct connection between the "War of Minds" and the "Guerrilla War on the Eastern Front since 1941".¹⁸ But even the history of ideas during World War One deserved to be understood by her own preconditions. How much people in Germany tried to learn from the allied propaganda can be demonstrated by Werner Sombart who was one of the most read social scientists at his time.

III

In February 1915 it was Werner Sombart who adopted an unaccommodating tone of voice in his book "Merchants and Heroes". The economist, a genius when it came to self-marketing, had realised that drastic simplification was the single most effective weapon in the over-heating debates of the Great War. Accordingly, he decided for a palette of black and white, depicting the English as greedy merchants who had to be put in place by the brave Germans. He savagely argued against the "confusion of war and sports" and contrasted an atomised British society with a socially-minded German community.¹⁹

Sombart's book served primarily ideological rearmament. It should show young German soldiers "the direction, where in all future the enemy of German character should be searched".²⁰ According to that the pictures used to characterise the enemy were very drastic. England is described as a giant octopus trying to strangle the world.²¹ In the long run, however, it would be impossible for English merchants to advertise their ideal of a comfortable life. Most people would assess a pure utilitarian understanding of human culture as far too superficial. The future, however, would belong to the heroic man, who would not shrink away from a life more dangerous and who was deeply rooted within his own people, his *Volk*.

To this day Sombart's book is regarded an exemplar of German academic chauvinism and its success is emphasised time and again. As it happens the "salon-Marxist" had first and foremost disgruntled his colleagues, who were offended by his unscrupulous use of resentments. The liberal left was steadfast in its Anglomania and so his prejudiced examples would not take hold.²² In Weimar, however, where Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche was busy

marketing her late brother as a national hero, Sombart's ideas and arguments aroused great interest. A debasement of British civilisation matched her own agenda and gave her the opportunity to push forward Nietzsche's patriotism. Sombart had, after all, called her brother the "last bard and seer of the German people" and had emphatically underlined his military attitude.²³

However, the contradiction against the political use of Nietzsche was violent. First of all it came from Expressionist writers, who's enemies liked to call them "Cafehausliteraten". This can be demonstrated by an article of Franz Pfemfert which argued against "the occupation of Nietzsche as pure German" ("Die Deutschsprechung Nietzsches") by his sister.²⁴ Till today this text is used to illustrate the change of the reception of Nietzsche during World War One. But one should avoid any exaggeration. Elisabeth Förster-Nietzsche's decision would be fundamental for the political orientation of the Nietzsche Archive but this should not hide the fact that radical ideas such as these were hardly acceptable for the majority of German academia.

In view of an inconceivable number of war victims it was, in the end, all about giving meaning. Only those who were easily able to construe historic continuity seemed to know the way into a better future. For that reason brusque comments and attitudes were far less in demand than is widely believed among historians.²⁵ Moreover, we should not underestimate the human need for stability. Nationalistic concepts in particular had to vouch for the perpetuity of a world whose dissolution was suspected but could not be faced. On these grounds clap speakers like Rudolf Eucken, a neo-idealist from Jena, emerged as key figures in the "War of the Minds". In the thinking of this noble laureate Luther, Kant, and Fichte became the forefathers of German philosophy, whose humanist ideas were vastly superior to an unleashed modernity. The significance of this intellectual tradition led him to conclude that the fortunes of war would be with Germany.²⁶

This does not mean, however, that Eucken's high regard for the German culture would evoke sympathy in the western world and even less was it universally shared. Quite the contrary – the heroes of German intellectual tradition were being disliked emphatically. Especially Kant, seen as the advocate of a strict sense of duty among the military, or Fichte, seen as a presumptuous prophet of his own people met for the most part with an almost categorical refusal. The American pragmatist John Dewey argued, for instance, that there was a tight link between the all too daring ego-philosophy of German Idealism and the Central Powers' excessive aims of war.²⁷ His claims are, of course, unfounded and would not withstand a serious academic debate – but they clearly illustrate how allegations and reproaches were being exchanged in this "War of the minds" and how heated it actually was. German academia had wrongly relied on its own "good will". Under the conditions of a propaganda-war, Kant's concept only served to substantiate one's own claims or to obscure the political situation. "Good will" as the legitimising principle of normative ethics was an idea that had ceased to convince and by 1918 at the latest it had become obsolete.

IV

To conclude I would like to sum up some results. We are paying a high price for our clear-cut picture of the "War of the Minds". We are repeating – albeit critically – nationalistic topoi and in doing so we are contributing – albeit unintentionally – to their continued existence. At the same time we are underestimating the contextual character of world-war-literature – only at first glance do they appear to utter convictions that are set in stone. While being very aware of censorship and its prime objective of upholding the civic truce, the authors still wanted to influence domestic politics.²⁸ Before we are able to properly understand these writings we have to decipher camouflaged comments and ideologically charged expressions.

To my mind two things are crucial for a better understanding of world-war-literature. Firstly, we should pay more attention to ambiguities. For example, it is neither widely known nor satisfactorily explained why Houston Stewart Chamberlain was the most read German propaganda-writer – he sold more than one million books. His contacts with the Imperial court were certainly advantageous, as well as the professionalism of his publisher Bruckmann in Munich. But the pivotal point was a different one. Richard Wagner’s son in law simply had more to offer to his readers than Eucken with his glorification of Protestant tradition of *Bildung* or Sombart with his England-bashing garnished with a touch of cultural pessimism. When describing the British spirit of merchandise, Chamberlain used a language tinted with anti-Semitism, which evaded censorship but was easily understood by the extremist right. At the same time he boldly ignored all facts that contradicted his philosophy of history and thus ensured its attractiveness, which is peculiar to self-contained views of the world in a time of crisis.²⁹

Secondly, we should pay more attention to the discursive dynamics of this unforgiving propaganda-war. Having resorted to coarse nationalistic drumming in the first place the intellectuals were left with little room for manoeuvre later on. Accordingly, a history of ideas, too, needs to analyse the “intrinsic logics” that were formative for the “Great War”.³⁰ To name but one example: The defiant commitment to the “German militarism” fuelled a disastrous stereotype and, moreover, aided and abetted a distortion of Germany’s past. It shows, if nothing else, how careful one should be when dealing with nationalistic prejudices. This is valid down to the present day.

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1 Kurt Flasch, *Die geistige Mobilmachung. Die deutschen Intellektuellen und der Erste Weltkrieg*, Berlin 2000.

2 Cf. the first in-depth study regarding the diverse forms of “Deutschtumsmetaphysik” during the Great War: Hermann Lübke, *Politische Philosophie in Deutschland. Studien zu ihrer Geschichte*, Basel / Stuttgart 1963, part 4. Cf. most recently Ulrich Sieg, *Geist und Gewalt. Deutsche Philosophen zwischen Kaiserreich und Nationalsozialismus*, Munich 2013, pp. 103-149.

3 Cf. Wolfgang Mommsen (ed.), *Kultur und Krieg. Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg*, München 1996, and the case study Ulrich Sieg, *Jüdische Intellektuelle im Ersten Weltkrieg. Kriegserfahrungen, weltanschauliche Debatten und kulturelle Neuentwürfe*, 2nd ed. Berlin 2008.

4 Cf. for an approach like this: Steffen Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat. Die “Ideen von 1914” und die Neuordnung Deutschlands im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Berlin 2003, and Peter Hoeres, *Krieg der Philosophen. Die deutsche und die britische Philosophie im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Paderborn et al. 2004.

5 “*Nur zweierlei ist möglich: entweder auswandern; oder deutsch werden. Dann aber: sich eingraben, einwurzeln mit aller Kraft, mit allen Adern, allen Muskeln, sich zum Deutschen erziehen, die Sache der Deutschen zu der eigenen machen*”, in: Sprechsaal, *Deutschtum und Judentum*, *Der Kunstwart* of April 1st, p. 12. Quoted after the excellent book of Elisabeth Albanis, *German Jewish Identity from 1900 to the Aftermath of the First World War. A Comparative Study of Moritz Goldstein, Julius Bab and Ernst Lissauer*, Tübingen 2002, which I owe a lot.

6 “*Wir wollen nicht lassen von unserem Haß / Wir haben alle nur einen Haß, / Wir lieben vereint, wir hassen vereint, / Wie haben alle nur einen Feind / England.*” Ernst Lissauer, *Haßgesang gegen England*, in: Id., *Worte in die Zeit. Flugblätter 1914*, 1. Blatt, Göttingen 1914; translation by Barbara Henderson, as it appeared in *The New York Times* of October 15th, 1914.

7 “*Das Gedicht fiel wie eine Bomber in ein Munitionsdepot*”; Stefan Zweig, *Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers*, Munich 1981, p. 286.

8 Cf. Elisabeth Albanis, *Ostracised for Loyalty: Ernst Lissauer’s Propaganda Writing and its Reception*, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 43 (1998), pp. 195-224, here p. 196. For the anti-British salutations cf. Jeffrey Verhey, *Der “Geist von 1914” und die Erfindung der Volksgemeinschaft*, Hamburg 2000, pp. 204 et seq.

9 This was the literary scholar Ludwig Geiger (Bonn). Regarding the context of Segel’s survey cf. Sieg, *Jüdische Intellektuelle im Ersten Weltkrieg* op. cit., p. 83 et seq., and David Brenner, *Marketing Identities. The Invention of Jewish Ethnicity in “Ost und West”*, Detroit 1998.

10 Translation as it appeared in *The North American Review* vol. 210, no. 765 (August 1919), pp. 284-287 (<http://www.jstor>).

- org/stable/25122278, 27/06/2014). For the original text cf. the exemplary German edition by Jürgen and Wolfgang von Ungern-Sternberg, *Der Aufruf "An die Kulturwelt!"*. Das Manifest der 93 und die Anfänge der Kriegspropaganda im Ersten Weltkrieg, Stuttgart 1997, p. 144 et seq. The following observations owe a lot to this study.
- 11 Fritz Fischer, *Der Griff nach der Weltmacht. Die Kriegspolitik des kaiserlichen Deutschland*, Deutschland 1961, p. 180. This mistake went well with Fischer's aversion to the Prussian "society of subservient subjects" ("Untertanengesellschaft") and he did not correct it in later editions. Cf. Bernhard vom Brocke, 'Wissenschaft und Militarismus'. *Der Aufruf der 93 'An die Kulturwelt!' und der Zusammenbruch der internationalen Gelehrtenrepublik im Ersten Weltkrieg*, in: William M. Calder III, Helmut Flashar and Theodor Lindken (eds.), *Wilamowitz nach 50 Jahren*, Darmstadt 1985, pp. 649-719, here p. 655 et seq., note 7.
 - 12 The names are listed in Ungern-Sternberg, *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt op. cit.*, pp.145-147.
 - 13 Encompassing Margit Szöllösi-Janze, *Fritz Haber 1868-1934. Eine Biographie*, Munich 1998.
 - 14 For Einstein's isolation during the war cf. Siegfried Grundmann, *Einsteins Akte. Einsteins Jahre in Deutschland aus der Sicht der deutschen Politik*, Berlin / Heidelberg 1998, pp. 39-80.
 - 15 Ungern-Sternberg, *Aufruf an die Kulturwelt op. cit.*, p. 145; regarding the manifesto's reception abroad cf. *ibid*, pp. 81-104.
 - 16 *Sieg, Geist und Gewalt op. cit.*, p. 109.
 - 17 Cf. Georg Eckert, *Steife Oberlippe, hängende Unterlippe: Julikrise und Kriegsbeginn in der Londoner Times*, in: Id., Peter Geiss and Arne Karsten (eds.), *Die Presse in der Julikrise 1914. Die internationale Berichterstattung und der Weg in den Ersten Weltkrieg*, Münster 2014, pp. 113-135, here pp. 126-130.
 - 18 So Hans-Ulrich Wehler, *Deutsche Gesellschaftsgeschichte*, vol. 4: *Vom Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs bis zur Gründung der beiden deutschen Staaten*, Munich 2003, p. 19; to my own position see the articles "Deutsche Geschichte ist nicht tiefschwarz", in: *Cicero*, October 2013, pp. 120-125, and "Erkenntnis und Empathie", in: *Rotary Magazin* 3/2014, pp. 48-51.
 - 19 Werner Sombart, *Händler und Helden. Patriotische Besinnungen*, 11.-20. Tausend Munich / Leipzig 1915, p. 48.
 - 20 *Ibid*, p. VI.
 - 21 *Ibid*, p. 37.
 - 22 This has already been noted by Friedrich Lenger, Werner Sombart als Propagandist eines deutschen Krieges, in: Wolfgang J. Mommsen (ed.), *Kultur und Krieg. Die Rolle der Intellektuellen, Künstler und Schriftsteller im Ersten Weltkrieg*, Munich 1996, pp. 65-76, but the somewhat simplistic opinions on Sombart seem to have prevailed.
 - 23 *Sombart, Händler und Helden op. cit.*, p. 53.
 - 24 Franz Pfemfert, *Die Deutschsprechung Friedrich Nietzsches. Ein Protest*, in: *Die Aktion* 5 (1915), pp. 320-323; to the historical context cf. Steven E. Aschheim, *Nietzsche und die Deutschen. Karriere eines Kults*, Stuttgart / Weimar 1996 pp.140-143.
 - 25 Cf. most recently Ernst Piper, *Nacht über Europa. Kulturgeschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Berlin 2013. The study is nevertheless well worth reading.
 - 26 Cf. *Sieg, Geist und Gewalt op. cit.*, pp. 117-122.
 - 27 John Dewey, *German Philosophy and Politics*, New York 1915.
 - 28 This has been elucidated by Bruendel, *Volksgemeinschaft oder Volksstaat op. cit.*, especially pp. 93-132.
 - 29 Cf. Erik Lindner, *Houston Stewart Chamberlain: The Abwehrverein and the „Praeceptor Germaniae“*, 1914-1918, in: *Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 37 (1992), pp. 213-236, and *Sieg, Jüdische Intellektuelle im Ersten Weltkrieg op. cit.*, pp. 183-187.
 - 30 Cf. the masterly study by Jörn Leonhard, *Büchse der Pandora, Geschichte des Ersten Weltkrieges*, Munich 2014, here p. 28.