



# Solidarity of the shaken: from the experience (*Erlebnis*) to history

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## Abstract

In his *Heretical Essays*, Jan Patočka introduces the concept of the *solidarity of the shaken*. He argues that it emerges in the conditions of political violence—the frontline experience (*Fronterlebnis*). Moreover, Patočka brings into discussion the puzzling concepts of day, night, metanoia and sacrifice, which only further problematise the idea. Researching how other thinkers have examined the phenomenon of the frontline experience, it becomes obvious that Patočka did not invent the obscure vocabulary *ex nihilo*. Concepts such as frontline experience, sacrifice and the metaphors of the day and night were commonly used by thinkers in the inter-war and post-war eras in their examination of community (*Gemeinschaft*). This study aims to reconstruct the idea of the solidarity of the shaken as contextualized within a broader scholarly debate on the concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*). Through the critical dialogue between Patočka's works and the works of Ernst Jünger and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, this study will portray how Patočka, in his discourse on the frontline experience, follows the usual pattern of overcoming one's individuality, transcending and opening up to the constitution of solidarity. This paper will argue that Patočka defined the solidarity of the shaken in an attempt to revive the positive aspects of a community and break with the regressive (if not sinister) uses to which it was put in the twentieth century.

**Keywords** Solidarity of the shaken · Frontline experience · Decadence · History · Nihilism · Europe

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## Introduction

In the fifth of his *Heretical Essays*, Patočka argues that the twentieth century is the century of war. All aspects of human existence, in his view, were penetrated by the war energies and took on the expression of war. What matters is the technological advancement and the progress of civilization. In this gloomy image of the twentieth century, Patočka rethinks how the decadence of the century can be overcome, examining how one can face and respond to the decline of European civilization.

In the sixth of his *Heretical Essays*, Patočka offers an alternative answer when he argues: “[t]he means by which this state [of war] can be overcome is the *solidarity of the shaken*” (Patočka 1996, 134). Patočka, however, does not explain what the solidarity of the shaken is, nor what this novel political community could represent in the political realm. Instead, Patočka argues the solidarity of the shaken emerges in the conditions of political violence—the frontline experience. He brings into the discussion puzzling concepts such as day, night, sacrifice and metanoia which only further problematise the idea, thus leaving his readers with only a few indications and vague traits.

However, in researching how other thinkers have examined the phenomenon of the frontline experience, it becomes evident that Patočka did not invent the obscure vocabulary *ex nihilo*. Concepts such as frontline experience, sacrifice and the metaphors of the day and night were commonly used by thinkers in the inter-war and post-war eras in their examination of community (*Gemeinschaft*).

This study casts light on Patočka’s critical reading of the analyses of the frontline offered by two of his predecessors and frontline survivors, French philosopher and Jesuit Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and German writer Ernst Jünger, with the aim of reconstructing the main characteristics of the solidarity of the shaken. It argues that Patočka focused his attention on these two thinkers’ analyses of the frontline experience with a clear intention to point to two mainstream responses to the decline pervasive in the twentieth century and to critically assess their shortcomings. Patočka first examines the response of Christianity—the community being the unity in Christ—offered by Teilhard. Although Patočka argues that “Christianity remains thus far the greatest, unsurpassed [...] outreach that enabled humans to struggle against decadence” (ibid. 108), in Patočka’s view, Christianity is not a sufficient tool in the fight against the state of war in the twentieth century. Further, Patočka points to the other attempt to overcome the decline: the ideas of embracing technological progress and of total mobilization being utilized for our own particular interest, in the context of which Jünger presents his idea of the frontline community (*Frontgemeinschaft*) and his model of materialist history. Patočka denies the idea, arguing that total mobilization is the very core of the twentieth-century crisis and that total mobilization itself only further extends the state of war the twentieth century turned into.

In response to these two mainstream reactions to the decline of the twentieth century, Patočka introduces his idea of the solidarity of the shaken and his concept of history. He suggests that the solidarity of the shaken is neither a Christian community nor a *Frontgemeinschaft*—a solidarity of men of steel who are insensitive to

all pain and later transform into workers (Jünger 2003, 57) “who work to assure their sustenance” (Patočka 1996, 15). In Patočka’s view, both proposed communities are ahistorical. In contrast to these two main developments of the idea of the community, Patočka portrays the solidarity of the shaken—the community of those who “are capable of understanding what life and death are all about and what history is about” (ibid. 134). By referring to the solidarity of the shaken, Patočka not only undermines the two mainstream tendencies for responding to the twentieth-century state of crisis, but also offers his own solution to the state of ongoing war that occurred in the twentieth century. He defines the solidarity of the shaken in an attempt to revive the positive aspects of a community and break with the regressive (if not sinister) uses to which it was put in the twentieth century.

### The end of metaphysics and the decadent life

In the fifth of the *Heretical Essays*, “Is Technological Civilization Decadent and Why?”, Patočka questions the problem of modernity and modern nihilism and defines what exactly makes one’s life and society decadent:

A life can be said to be decadent when it loses its grasp on the innermost nerve of its functioning, when it is disrupted at its inmost core so that while thinking itself full it is actually draining and laming itself with every step and act. A society can be said to be decadent if it so functions as to encourage a decadent life, a life addicted to what is inhuman by its very nature. (Patočka 1996, 97)

Patočka describes decadent life as a life that is out of balance, no longer possesses control over itself and clings to inhuman phenomena which are foreign to the life’s nature. The decadent life “loses its grasp on the innermost nerve of its functioning” (ibid.) and is disrupted at its very core.

Patočka develops his discourse on decadence in the wake of the decline of metaphysics, with the awareness that one reliable meaning is no longer available. With the metaphor of a disrupted “inner nerve”, therefore, Patočka does not appeal to the problem of the missing moral values and moral concepts. On the contrary, the inner core designates something that is “inseparable from human life in its intrinsic nature, its very being” (ibid.). What Patočka refers to is the lost “self-awareness that comes with an understanding of history and the care for the soul” (Findlay 2002, 118). In a decadent world, however, a human being does not only lose this self-awareness. After the end of metaphysics, one finds it difficult to accept the world as it is—as essentially problematic—and tends to replace the lost metaphysical meaning with simplified explanations of the world.

Although the turning point of modernity can be traced back to the sixteenth century and is intertwined with the shift of focus from “being” to “having” (Leufer 2016, 164), central to Patočka’s analysis of the twentieth-century war decadence is the infamous motif of total mobilization. The use of the inner nerve metaphor in Patočka’s essays is, therefore, not accidental. One can read it as a reference to what a frontline survivor and writer Ernst Jünger, in his inter-war essay *Total Mobilisation*

(*Die totale Mobilmachung*) (1930), calls “the deepest marrow and the life’s finest nerve” (Jünger 1993, 125).<sup>1</sup>

In this inter-war essay, Jünger describes the age of total mobilization. He argues that the First World War was a significant historical event because it released unlimited energy and force. This energy can be utilized and extended to transform countries swayed by the war into “volcanic forges” (ibid.)—powerful epicentres of energy, labour and production which would dynamically and efficiently enhance civilization’s progress in the post-war (*Nachkrieg*) times. To envision such an extension, he introduces the phenomenon of total mobilization and argues that in order to achieve this desired elevation of the warring countries into the age of labour (*Arbeitszeitalter*), the means of war—active nihilism and violence (two underpinnings of total mobilization)—need to be extended “to the deepest marrow”, “life’s finest nerve” (ibid.), of post-war society.

In the fifth and sixth of the *Heretical Essays*, Patočka on several occasions refers to the concept of total mobilization:

War is simultaneously the greatest undertaking of industrial civilization, both product and instrument of total mobilization (as Ernst Jünger rightly saw), and a release of orgiastic potentials which could not afford such extreme of intoxication with destruction under any other circumstances. (Patočka 1996, 114)

Patočka perceives Jünger exclusively as a diagnostician of modernity. He separates his political views from his scholarship and does not express any judgments over his dubious past. Patočka only instrumentally uses Jünger’s idea of total mobilization to support his argument on modern nihilism, decadent life and war portrayal. Patočka sees the war as both the product and the instrument of total mobilization. It not only turns the world into war but also maintains the war, and all with the goal of preserving the smooth and uninterrupted progress of civilization.

However, although Patočka is not particularly critical towards Jünger, he does realise that Jünger’s proposal of total mobilization is not only the romantic, utopian dream of a frontline veteran. In twentieth-century post-war Europe, the idea of total mobilization became a mainstream model of materialist history<sup>2</sup>—the path

<sup>1</sup> In this unlimited marshalling of potential energies, which transforms the warring countries into volcanic forges, we perhaps find the most striking sign of the dawn of the age of labour [*Arbeitszeitalter*]. It makes the [First] World War a historical event superior in significance to the French Revolution. In order to deploy energies of such proportion, fitting one’s sword-arm no longer suffices; for this is a mobilization [*Rüstung*] that requires extension to the deepest marrow, *life’s finest nerve*. Its realization is the task of total mobilization: an act which, as if through a single grasp of the control panel, conveys the extensively branched and densely veined power supply of modern life towards the great current of martial energy. (Jünger 1993, 125).

<sup>2</sup> Patočka criticize the concept of materialist history in his other essays as well (Prague: Oikoymenh 2010, 2011), Jan Patočka, ‘The Dangers of Technicization in Science according to E. Husserl and the Essence of Technology as Danger according to M. Heidegger (Varna Lecture 1985, 1998)’, (Prague: Oikoymenh 1996), pp. 139–242 (p. 235).

that Europe was certainly following even 40 years after Jünger wrote his essay. In the twentieth century, war energies through the means of total mobilization did penetrate the innermost nerve of life and society. The obsession with the material progress of civilization supplanted self-awareness, understanding of history and turned the entire twentieth century into the age of war (Patočka 1996, 119). In the world swayed by total mobilization, all things, both human and material, have assumed the pattern of war or the expression of force (Dodd 2011, 203). Force penetrates all spheres of human existence and turns it into a battlefield (Patočka 1996, 133).

Patočka closes his fifth essay with a realization that the question of decadence exceeds the mere enquiry of civilization:

Perhaps the entire question about civilization's decadence is incorrectly posed. There is no civilization as such. The question is whether historical humans are still willing to embrace history (Patočka 1996, 118).

To find an answer to the problem of decadence, one is called to renew one's relationship to history and understanding of it; one is called to revitalise the "innermost nerve", which in the post-metaphysical age has been penetrated by war energies and disrupted at its very core.

## The frontline experience

Patočka states that war is "an idea foreign to all philosophies of history" (Patočka 1996, 120) and in itself does not have "power of bestowing meaning" (ibid.). However, within the "dehumanizing power of total mobilization" (Warren 2013, 208) that drives the machinery of the war, Patočka discovers a moment which has the capacity to elevate above, to transcend and break with the mesmerising power of total mobilization and the illusion of war. Patočka discovers the lived experience of the frontline (*Fronterlebnis*), to which he attaches a considerable significance.

While the war approaches life and death through the perspective of the day—impersonally and statistically, as if it were merely a reassignment of roles" (Patočka 1996, 120)—the frontline experience reveals the unknown, the contingent and mysterious side of the war. Unlike the impersonal phenomenon of war, the frontline captures war in its truthful, naturalistic and authentic manifestation, with its horrors, frights and existential battles. The frontline experience, so conceived, remains the spark of authenticity in an unshakeable machinery of war. Although the frontline experience represents, as Patočka argues, "absurdity par excellence" (ibid. 126), an event which is "horrifying" (ibid. 125), "[t]he frontline is the resistance to [...] 'demoralising,' terrorising, and deceptive motifs of the day" (ibid. 134)—to the impersonal forces of war. The frontline experience, so conceived, as Patočka believes, has the capacity to become an event which can change the entire course of history. It has a capacity to "transcend humanity" (ibid. 131) and save it from the dangers of total mobilization.

Patočka wrote the *Heretical Essays* in 1975, and unlike other thinkers,<sup>3</sup> Patočka never served on the frontline. Therefore, in his depictions, he does not speak from his personal experience. Patočka, however, was not the first philosopher who was occupied by the idea of the frontline experience. An entire generation of thinkers before him were fascinated by the phenomenon and tried to understand its meaning,<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Mahnke, Edmund Husserl, Georg Simmel and Max Scheler among them (Warren 2013, 214). Although each of these thinkers approached the frontline from a slightly different perspective, the discourse on the frontline shares some common features, and most of the authors follow a very similar trajectory. The analysis of the frontline experience culminates in a belief in a radical breakthrough event—a radical moment of liberation from the previous conditions, the establishment of peace or bestowal of a new meaning. Additionally, the narrative describes a double movement the frontline participants usually undergo: (1) first the moment of self-surrender, depersonalisation, in which one overcomes their individuality (ibid.) and gives up on their personal interests, and (2) second, a moment of *transcendence* when the warrior opens towards “something greater” (ibid.) and constitutes “collective fused body (*Gemeinschaft*)” (ibid.).

Patočka, in his analysis, follows a similar pattern and in his discourse on the frontline experience incorporates the analyses offered by two of his predecessors and frontline survivors: Teilhard and Jünger. Yet, Patočka’s response to the frontline conditions differs to a great extent from his predecessors’ treatment of the frontline experience. Following Jünger and Teilhard’s perspectives, Patočka observes that in the very depth of the frontline trenches, there is something “deeply and mysteriously positive” (Patočka 1996, 126). By the “positive”, Patočka refers neither to the initial enthusiasm of the young warriors, so powerfully portrayed in Jünger’s memoir *The Storm of Steel* (Jünger 2003, 5), nor to a perverse desire to find satisfaction in the return of the natural elements into life. By the “positive”, Patočka refers to a moment of realization of an insight, which awakens in the frontline trenches and stays with the warriors for many years even after the war: “The person on the frontline is gradually overcome by an overwhelming sense of meaningfulness” (Patočka 1996, 126). So conceived, the frontline is not only a line of fire, a centre of accumulated energies that is the product of total mobilization; the frontline experience is first of all “the locus of a distinctive Life” (ibid.).

Patočka recognises another common trait in their interpretations, namely that both thinkers “emphasize the *upheaval* by the frontline [*otřes frontou*]” (ibid. 125). Both thinkers realise that the frontline experience “is not an immediate trauma but a fundamental transformation of human existence: war in the form of the frontline marks humans forever” (ibid.). Patočka agrees with these claims and, as aligned with these observations, argues that “[W]hoever lived through the front has become a different person” (ibid.).

<sup>3</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, Ernst Jünger, Paul Tillich and Ludwig Wittgenstein but also Max Scheler, Karl Löwith, Edith Stein and Adolf Reinach, among others.

<sup>4</sup> For a detailed analysis of the frontline experience, see Warren (2013).

## Community

Both Jünger and Teilhard, in their accounts, describe the moment a breakthrough, which culminates in solidarity (*Gemeinschaft*). Each in their own way, they follow a very similar trajectory which leads the frontline participant through the moment of surrendering—overcoming of one’s individuality and opening up to the new collective body—known as *Gemeinschaft*. The experience of the frontline in both cases leads to the emergence of very distinctive forms of community.

In his frontline memoir *Writings in Time of War* (1968), Teilhard retrospectively assesses the war experience and concludes that the frontline offers a unique opportunity to overcome individualistic tendencies and that, after this experience, a human being needs to strive to live with others (Chardin 1968, 285). He realises the necessity of unity in the sense that individuals, to achieve progress, are unified by a “common goal” (a mutually shared aim—*logos*) (ibid.), which exceeds particularistic, nationalistic and chauvinistic ambitions of specific individuals and social groups. Teilhard realises that the frontline experience offers an opportunity that leads to a new destiny for humanity which can only be realized through a collective human effort to pursue a mutual goal that connects all individuals—a goal that they all believe in and that becomes a driving force for their further actions.

In *Writings in Time of War*, Teilhard describes a warrior who, after experiencing the horror of the frontline, finds asylum in deep religious faith (ibid. 285–286). Following his essay “*La Nostalgie du Front*” (1917), he argues that combat has a mysterious side which transforms soldiers into a figuration of Christ, while Christ renders into the figuration of a soldier (Warren 2013, 238). The two—the participant of the frontline and Christ—become one. The experience of combat and the gift of death, in particular, allow each frontline soldier to “attain a human essence greater than himself” (ibid.), and they open up a realm of freedom as never before.

The horrifying experience led Teilhard towards the recognition of God’s incarnation in the frontline trenches. It led him to a conviction that the frontline experience cannot be rethought without the Christic element and the idea of a constant development and evolution within. Christ, for Teilhard, is the beginning and end of the cosmos. All individuals (the frontline participants included) are a part and are taking part in this cosmos, in the mystical living organism that is the body of Jesus Christ: “that of the inexpressible Cosmos of matter and of the new life, the Body of Christ, real and mystical, unity and multiplicity, monad and pleiad” (Teilhard 2013, 16).

Teilhard explains the foundations of such a community in the Body of Christ:

[T]his assimilation lies in loving-kindness and humility, in community of suffering, by which the Passion of Calvary is continued and completed, but above all in charity, that wonderful virtue which makes us see and cherish Christ in every man and so enables us to forward, in the “immediacy” of a single act, the unification of all in One. (ibid. 51)

Teilhard proposes the community of suffering and charity,<sup>5</sup> the foundation of which is not a conventional Christian dogma, but rather the effort to personalise Christ and his suffering in our everyday life and to recognise and appreciate the image of Christ in every human being. This proposal, therefore, is strictly grounded in Christian ethics.

In his war memoirs,<sup>6</sup> Ernst Jünger introduces the community of the frontline warriors—*Frontgemeinschaft*. In *Storm of Steel*, Jünger praises the transformation of the courageous warriors into strong, insensitive individuals capable of withstanding physical pain. He dreams about the community of soldiers who, under the negative conditions of the frontline, are transformed into bundles of energy, ruthless “men of steel”, “men who march straight ahead like iron machines, insensitive even at the moment catastrophe shatters them” (Jünger 2003, 57).

The idea of the *Frontgemeinschaft*, however, needs to be viewed in the context of total mobilization. Jünger praises the war for its ability to eliminate life and convert it to energy, (Jünger 1993, 126). However, through his idea of total mobilization, he announces a new war—the eternal, perpetual war transformed into “a gigantic labor process [*Arbeitsprozesses*]” (ibid.). In the context of this transformation, Jünger announces a new typus of the worker: “It thus turns out that each individual life becomes, ever more unambiguously, the life of a worker; and that, following the wars of knights, kings, and citizens, we now have wars of workers” (ibid. 128). The worker, the war soldier gradually transforms into, represents neither a new social class (which would be opposed to the bourgeois society Jünger was so fervently critical of) nor a new subjectivity—an individual.<sup>7</sup> Rather, Jünger dreams of a new breed of men—a new type of soldier (Kittler 2008, 82) who, in the conditions of the post-frontline, post-war (*Nachkrieg*) era, is willing to take action in the name of the technological programme (*Gestell*). *Gestell* becomes a key environment for the worker, who not only finds his home in its conditions, but also wills, creates and cultivates *Gestell*.

The *Frontgemeinschaft*, therefore, originates within the mutually shared experience of the frontline and “a strict new social ethic arising from the model of soldierly life” (Schechtman 2011, 151). The collective entity, Jünger proposes, is the community of “elite soldiers from every country, created by the war” (Wachsmann 1998, 576). This community exceeds the limitations of national identity and

<sup>5</sup> In his work *The Four Loves*, C.S Lewis distinguishes four types of love (affection, friendship, Eros, charity) and defines love as charity as follows: “The natural loves are not self-sufficient. Something else, at first vaguely described as ‘decency and common sense,’ but later revealed as goodness, and finally as the whole Christian life in one particular relation, must come to the help of the mere feeling if the feeling is to be kept sweet” (Lewis 2002, 163).

<sup>6</sup> *Storm of Steel (Im Stahlgewittern)* (1920) and *The Struggle as the Inner Experience (Der Kampf als inneres Erlebnis)* (1922).

<sup>7</sup> “[T]otal work-character breaks through collective boundaries just as much as through individual ones” (Jünger 2017, 65).



connects frontline warriors transnationally: “we frontline soldiers of the globe (*wir Frontsoldaten des Erdballs*)” (Jünger 2013, 46).<sup>8</sup> The worker represents a “global figure and his rule in different countries would eventually lead to his world domination” (Wachsmann 1998, 586). To draw a parallel between Ernst Jünger and Friedrich Nietzsche, the worker represents, “[T]he lord of the planet earth, the Übermensch, the one who will supplant Nietzsche’s ‘last man’, the bourgeois” (Kittler 2008, 82).

However, one may observe that the ideas of extreme nationalism and blood purity are missing in Jünger’s writings from this period. Despite his obvious fascination with war and even despite his constant glorification and aestheticisation of war, Jünger’s works from the early 1920s did not aim to instrumentalise war for political ends (Wachsmann 1998, 575). In his war memoirs, Jünger describes his personal war experience and his own success in the war. He portrays himself as a hero and pays tribute to all other frontline warriors regardless of their national affiliation. The main concerns of his two memoirs, and thus the cement of the community of *Frontgemeinschaft*, were the heroism and chivalry of the frontline soldiers, which reach beyond the idea of national identity. Jünger expresses his fascination with the heroic life in the frontline trenches and cannot deny the thrill and excitement of living with danger (*ibid.*). The aim of these two war memoirs, therefore, was not to establish a political agenda for Conservative Revolutionaries and later for National Socialists in Germany. Instead, Jünger aimed to pay tribute to and sought admiration for all frontline warriors (*ibid.*) and, in a purely Nietzschean fashion, aimed to constitute a community on this new set of virtues.

## History

Patočka appears to be a sympathetic reader of both Teilhard and Jünger. He considers them to be first of all diagnosticians of modernity.<sup>9</sup> However, at some point, Patočka becomes critical towards these two thinkers, arguing that the relationship

<sup>8</sup> Some interpretations argue that Jünger’s idea of *Frontgemeinschaft* became gradually popular among Conservative Revolutionaries and laid the foundation for many politically organised groups, such as Free Corps (*Freikorps*): “The ex-army officer Ernst Jünger propagated the myth of 1914, and in his popular book *Storm of Steel* exalted the image of the frontline troops who had found their true being only in the exercise of violence and the suffering, and inflicting, of pain” (Evans 2005, 121). Many scholars argue that Jünger’s idea of *Frontgemeinschaft* served as a springboard for sinister forms of communities, the national community of *Volksgemeinschaft* among them.

<sup>9</sup> Here I would drive the attention to the selection of words Patočka uses in his *Heretical Essays* when referring to Jünger: “War is simultaneously the greatest undertaking of industrial civilization, both product and instrument of total mobilization (as Ernst Jünger rightly saw)” (Patočka 1996, 114). “Ernst Jünger’s *Der Arbeiter* contains an implicit suspicion of the actual revolutionary nature of the old prewar Germany” (Patočka 1996, 122). Patočka, comparing to thinkers like Walter Benjamin (1979, 2002) does not see Jünger to be the promoter of the idea of total mobilization or directly accountable for helping National Socialist to get in power, rather just as someone who only describes and evaluates the critical state inter-war Europe occurred in.

between the frontline experience and history is more complex than found in their works:

How can the front line experience acquire the form which would make it a factor of history? Why is it not becoming that? Because in the form described so powerfully by Teilhard and Jünger, it is the experience of all individuals projected individually each to their summit from which they cannot but retreat back to everydayness where they will inevitably be seized again by war in the form of force's plan for peace. The means by which this state is overcome is the solidarity of the shaken. (Patočka 1996, 134)

Although Patočka to a certain extent adopts the interpretations of the frontline experience as offered by his predecessors, he points to the shortcomings of their positions. Patočka is aware that both thinkers, regardless of their differences, did reveal the principle of *polemos*<sup>10</sup> within frontline. The frontline represents an experience that may trigger the turn to history—the new beginning and has the potential to become what he calls “a factor of history” (ibid. 134). However, the mere recognition of *polemos* within the frontline experience, according to Patočka, is not the breaking point in transforming this lived experience (*Erlebnis*) into a historical factor.

Patočka argues that the treatments of the frontline experience, as proposed by Teilhard in *Writings in Time of War* (1968) and by Jünger in his war memoirs *Storm of Steel* (1920) and *The Struggle as the Inner Experience* (1922), strip the frontline experience of its agency. Here, Patočka points to two fundamental problems. First, he recognises that both Teilhard and Jünger, in their treatments of the frontline, do not place much emphasis on the unity (“unity of action, performed by a Spirit” [Patočka 2008, 129]), which Patočka believes is a prerequisite for the further movement of history. As he argues, the frontline in their view is “the experience of all

<sup>10</sup> In his formulation of the concept of *polemos*, Patočka is primarily influenced by Heidegger's interpretation of Heraclitus' Fragment (2001, 53): “War is both father of all and king of all: it reveals the gods on the one hand and humans on the other, makes slaves on the one hand, the free on the other” (Heidegger 2015, 159). Heidegger (and Patočka adopts this idea of his) undermines the assumption that *polemos* is identical with war in the human sense. He argues, that *polemos* represents strife: “that holds sway before everything divine and human, not war in the human sense” (Heidegger 2000, 67). Fried interprets Heidegger's idea of *polemos* as “War [*polemos*] is concerned with the fundamental limits of life and death, freedom and slavery, war sets the most extreme aspects of the human condition into their sharpest relief for the Greeks” (Fried 2000, 27). Or as Žižek interprets it: “[T]he ongoing process of struggle itself as the ultimate reality, as the process out of which all entities as well as their (temporary) order emerge” (Žižek 2009, 149). According to Nicolas de Warren, the concept of *polemos* takes on a very particular meaning in Patočka's works: “Genuine historical existence and responsibility emerges with the twin appearance of philosophy and political life, both of which institute a fundamental ‘shaking’ of accepted meaning by ushering into existence and responsibility crystallizes around the event of *polemos* – a term that amidst various translations, but which is better left untranslated if we are to underscore its strangeness and polymorphous meaning; even if Patočka himself alternates between retaining the Greek term and providing multiple specifications, or translations, such as ‘battle’, ‘strife’, and ‘conflict.’ One of the difficulties of fathoming *polemos* consists in keeping its ontological significance apart from possible metaphorical and mythical applications” (Warren 2013, 219). “On the theoretical plane, *polemos* is insight; on the practical plane, *polemos* is a care of the soul, as well as an inter-subjective form of co-existence among those who have broken from the natural world” (ibid. 221).

individuals projected individually each to their summit from which they cannot but retreat back to everydayness” (Patočka 1996, 134). Patočka does not deny the transformative power that the frontline experience has for each individual. However, he is convinced that, once the frontline has been experienced in isolation, it leads to completely different outcomes. Although both Jünger and Teilhard demonstrate in their works that the frontline experience naturally leads to the constitution of a new form of community (Jünger speaks about *Frontgemeinschaft*, while Teilhard proposes the unity within Christ), Patočka suggests there is a difference between their visions of community and his proposal of the solidarity of the shaken.

Second, Patočka recognises that, although both Jünger and Teilhard discover *polemos* within the frontline trenches, the power of *polemos* does not become directive and foundational for their concepts of community. While Teilhard seeks new meaning in old Christian values and faith, Jünger seeks meaning in the new set of values—heroism and chivalry—of frontline warriors. Following Patočka’s words, Jünger and Teilhard, instead of opening themselves to the constitutive power of *polemos*, retreat to everydayness, in which they are seized by the eternal war. The frontline experience in practice changes nothing.

Through a close reading of Teilhard’s and Jünger’s works, one can observe two extreme tendencies that ultimately support the state of ongoing warfare. The frontline experience, as described by these two thinkers, does not lead to the upheaval of history in Patočka’s sense of the word, but rather, due to the individualistic tendencies and the strong bond to the everydayness, the experience supports the ongoing state of nihilism in its two different forms.

In *Writings in Time of War*, the sentiments of deep religious faith lead to capitulation and passivity. Although this attitude does not initially seem dangerous, it has radical consequences, especially if the individual becomes passive and manifests their reluctance and inactivity within the political space.<sup>11</sup> In Patočka’s case, the passivity of citizens indirectly supports the state of ongoing warfare. The alternative that Teilhard presents can be identified with what Nietzsche, in *The Will to Power*, defines as passive nihilism—“nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit” (Nietzsche 1968, 17).

An alternative consequence of the individual’s experience of the frontline is offered by Jünger in *Storm of Steel*. Jünger portrays a scenario that can be identified with Nietzsche’s idea of active nihilism—“nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit” (ibid.)—which again supports and extends the ongoing war through an active and possibly violent involvement in it. According to Patočka, Jünger’s and Teilhard’s views on the frontline, community and history therefore represent two main streams of thought:

Today’s polarised world might at times seem like the battlefield of two nihilisms in Nietzsche’s sense of the word: the stage of a struggle between an active

<sup>11</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas aptly describes this attitude of passivity and its consequences in the final passages of *Totality and Infinity*. He argues that “politics left to itself bears Tyranny within itself” (Lévinas 1979, 252). Lévinas suggests that politics without any response from citizens leads to devastating consequences, in which it will succumb to the state of tyranny.

and a passive nihilism: the nihilism of those who are hampered by inconsistent remnants of antiquated meaning and those who unscrupulously carry through the transvaluation of all values from the standpoint of strength and power. (Patočka 1996, 73)

Patočka argues that neither of these thinkers managed to *overcome* the frontline experience and transform it into the factor of history. Their solutions either aim to find an asylum in a pre-existing truth as prior to the emergence of the frontline or aim to transvalue all values. Patočka, by his idea of the solidarity of the shaken, however, aims to offer an alternative to these two mainstream lines of thought and argues that the only way to overcome the frontline is to align the freedom of the frontline with responsibility and that the only way to do that is through the solidarity of the shaken—the formation of the community, which will be founded on the uniting power of *polemos* and problemat�city it entails. These enigmatic words by Patočka suggest that the question of overcoming the horror of the frontline (and thus the age of war the twentieth century occurred in) and its transformation into the factor of history is, first of all, a question of responsibility.

## Responsibility

To portray the problem of the decline of the twentieth century, Patočka opens up an enquiry of the First World War. Similar to his predecessors, he argues that the First World War was a very particular event of the twentieth century.

The first world war provoked a whole range of explanations among us, reflecting the effort of humans to comprehend this immense event, transcending any individual, carried out by humans and yet transcending humankind—a process in some sense cosmic. We sought to fit it into our categories, to come to terms with it as best we could—that is, basically, in terms of nineteenth-century ideas. The second world war provoked nothing of the sort; its direct causes and the course it took were (apparently) only too clear and, most of all, it did not end, mutating instead into something peculiar which looks neither quite like war nor quite like peace. (Patočka 1996, 119)

The First World War implemented war strategies, which caused the climax within the techno-scientific tendencies pervasive in European culture since modernity.<sup>12</sup> The Great War, for Patočka, represented a culminating point beyond which it was challenging to rethink humanity. Instead, the war triggered the necessity for a radical turn—a radical change of one’s mind (as *metanoein*) (ibid. 75).

Patočka aims to redefine the First World War in new terms. He realises that the First World War had been explained in terms of nineteenth-century ideas, which he uses to refer to the following two tendencies: (1) explaining the war as an outcome of nihilism and “an eternal return of the same as the solution to the crisis” (ibid. 92–93)—leading back to Nietzsche; and (2) the idea of overcoming decadence by returning to Byzantine Christianity (ibid.)—as proposed by Dostoyevsky. Patočka perceives these mainstream ideas as insufficient for obtaining an understanding of the events of the First World War. Therefore, he breaks with these two limiting and outdated proposals and aims to re-examine the problem of the Great War in a completely new light.

In his fifth *Heretical Essay*, Patočka reveals to readers a deeper, phenomenological understanding of the war by introducing two distinctions. First, he distinguishes between the profane and the sacred (the orgiastic), and then between the authentic and the inauthentic. These distinctions are closely intertwined and not only create his very distinctive understanding of war, decadence and the technological programme of *Gestell* but also lay foundations for his project of overcoming decadence and his idea of responsibility, respectively.

For Patočka, the profane is “the realm of the work and of the enslavement of life, its bondage to itself” (ibid. 99). The profane refers to the world of labour, humans’ attachments in the world, relationships with material things and encounters with

<sup>12</sup> The First World War is the decisive event in the history of the twentieth century. It determined its entire character. It was this war that demonstrated that the transformation of the world into a laboratory for releasing reserves of energy accumulated over billions of years can be achieved only by means of wars (Patočka 1996, 124). In contrast, the Second World War, as Patočka argues, did not stir up any of these emotions. Instead, the Second World War transformed into something “which looks neither quite like war nor quite like peace” (Patočka 1996, 119). Yet, most notably, the Second World War, according to Patočka, did not finish but continues as a “smouldering war [which] is no less cruel” (Patočka 1996, 133). When Patočka speaks about an ongoing war, he does not refer to the Cold War events, which were pervasive during his time. However, further references he uses in this context “the new relations of nuclear armaments and constant global destruction” (ibid.) may suggest that Patočka sees the Cold War as nothing but the Second World War extension. The aim of this study is not to provide an extensive analysis of the First World War; the aim is to narrow down its scope and to pay attention solely to the aspect which differentiates the Great War from all other Wars—the experience of the frontline. For a detailed analysis of the wars in the sixth of the Heretical Essays, see Dodd (2011). Hagedorn (2016). *Europe’s Twentieth Century: History of Wars and War as a History*. In: F. Tava (Ed.) and D. Meacham (Ed.), *Thinking after Europe: Jan Patočka and Politics*. London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, pp. 331–346.

others. The profane grounds a human being in a certain place and forms a relationship of interdependency between one and others. The profane can be perceived as an everyday burden that one carries, a certain form of everyday duty one conducts. Drawing a parallel with the theory of the three movements of human existence,<sup>13</sup> as introduced in *Body, Community, Language, World* (1968/1969), another of Patočka's works, the profane could be identified with what he describes within the second movement of human existence, the mode of existence, which is characterized by "the movement of self-sustenance, of self-projection—the movement of our coming to terms with the reality we handle, a movement carried out in the region of human work" (Patočka 1998, 148). Patočka perceives it as "the movement of work whose basic categories are those of the purposive, the utilitarian, the pragmatic" (ibid. 150). It is the realm of the average, anonymity, in which people cease to live their existence in fullness. Patočka realises that the second movement of human existence, which is characterized by the category of "the profane" is intrinsically inauthentic. This is because the profane stands as an obstacle to the full expression of one's existence, one's freedom, and reduces one to a social role (ibid. 151) that fits into an organised picture of society.

The sacred or the orgiastic, on the other hand, creates a counterweight to the profane. It turns the everydayness of the material world—with its attachment to life, work and material things—upside down. It frees human beings from the burden of work and channels out the accumulated and suppressed energy. The orgiastic is an escape from our everyday life and its burden. It is identical to the exceptional and astonishing. The orgiastic is an event in which a human being "enter[s] to stand in a relation to extraordinary powers which galvanize[s] them to the point of frenzy" (ibid. 100). However, once a human is confronted with the orgiastic, he or she will no longer feel themselves (ibid.). While the profane grounds and burdens a human being with work and responsibility, the sacred or the orgiastic frees a human being from its inauthenticity, releases uncontrollable freedom and shows one's existence in a completely different light.

Reading Durkheim, Patočka concludes that a human being lives in two different worlds that are entirely incompatible. These worlds are the everyday one (characterized by the profane), which burdens and grounds them, and the ecstatic, extraordinary, orgiastic one, (characterized by the orgiastic and demonic), which "is fundamentally opposed to the sense of enslavement experienced by the human alone" (ibid. 99).

However, as Patočka points out, although the orgiastic may seem authentic, at least more authentic than the profane, it is nothing but a mere flight from responsibility. The point for Patočka is, therefore, not only to escape the ordinary (the profane), which is considered to be inauthentic, but also to rise above the orgiastic and align it with responsibility, and as such to overcome decadence (ibid. 102). As

<sup>13</sup> In his theory of three movements of human existence, Patočka is highly influenced by Hannah Arendt's (1973, 2013) philosophy, especially by her concept of *Vita Activa* as examined in her work *The Human Condition*.

he argues, “[t]he demonic needs to be brought into a relation with responsibility as originally and primarily it is not” (ibid. 100).

Patočka characterises the relationship between the profane and the sacred (the orgiastic) as follows:

We believe that *I* in this sense emerges at the dawn of history and that it consists in not losing ourselves in the sacred, not simply surrendering ourselves within it, but rather in living through the whole opposition of the sacred and the profane with the dimension of the problematic which we uncover in the responsible questioning in a quest for clarity with the sobriety of the everyday, but also with an active daring for the vertigo it brings; *overcoming* everydayness without collapsing in self-forgetting into the region of darkness, however tempting. (ibid. 102)

In the sway of the profane and the orgiastic, Patočka discovers a critical moment. He recognises that responsibility (and so does history) unfolds in the tension between the profane and the sacred. Responsibility unfolds in the very problematicity of this tension and in the quest of the constant questioning, as a response to the tension between the profane and the orgiastic. Responsible (or historical) life, thus conceived, opens up neither in one’s submission to the everydayness, to its burden, nor in forgetting oneself in the alluring realm of the orgiastic and ecstatic. Responsible life opens up in “the inner mastering of the sacred through its interiorization, by not yielding to it externally but rather confronting internally its essential ground” (ibid.).

Responsibility and thus history represent an inner activity, an activity of the soul. It is the effort to master the tension between the profane and the orgiastic, to encompass its problematic character. Responsibility and history begin there, where a human being realises that life, which unfolds as a constant oscillation between the profane and the sacred, is decadent and that there must be a way to escape it. Following Patočka, “History originates as a rising above decadence, as the realization that life hitherto had been a life in decadence and that there is or that there are possibilities of living differently [...]” (ibid.). Patočka identifies the beginning of responsibility with the third movement of human existence, as the moment of “shaking”. While the first two movements are the “movements of finite beings [...] The third movement is an attempt to break through our earthliness” (Patočka 1998, 151). It begins with a shock, disappointment and is characterized by Patočka as the movement of “self-achievement” (ibid.). While the previous two movements presented to us a relatively stable and consistent picture of the world and the society, the third movement of human existence reveals the world as “shaken”, as constantly changeable, problematic, as identical to an open question.

The examination of the relationship between the profane and the orgiastic brings another distinction into focus, which Patočka introduces in this context: the distinction between the authentic and the inauthentic life. Whereas the inauthentic life stands for the tendencies of shaking off one’s responsibility, distancing oneself from history, from the innermost nerve of civilization, which in Patočka’s thought is represented by the inner activity of care for the soul, the authentic life stands for the effort to embrace history in its full problematicity. To live responsibly, to live a historical life, means to “embrace history” (Patočka 1996, 117) in the sense that one is



willing to embrace the tension between the two worlds that a human being oscillates between. Authentic, responsible life, as historical life, must therefore “not only pull itself away from the world, but also away from the annihilation of the world promised by demonic mystery” (Dodd 2011, 118).

If we now apply these two distinctions to Patočka’s understanding of the war, the war, represents a moment of the demonic, which carries one away from one’s ordinary everyday life. However, to align this situation of decadence with responsibility, one is called to embrace the problematic character of the situation and to respond to it with the inner activity of care for the soul, which manifests itself as the quest for constant questioning.

## The shaking

In response to Jünger and Teilhard, Patočka associated the frontline experience with a rupture and portrays the image of the frontline experience as the *shaking*. The term shaking itself appears in Patočka’s writings several times in both a descriptive and figurative sense. The frontline trench is a place in which everyone *trembles* with fear and “is eager for rotation” (Patočka 1996, 125–126). At the same time, the frontline represents a par excellence example of a lived experience (*Erlebnis*),<sup>14</sup> which triggers a moment of shaking in the sense that participants are being “shaken” of all meaning they considered to be true prior to the moment of shaking:

Nothing of the earlier life of acceptance remains in peace; all the pillars of the community, traditions, and myths, are equally shaken, as are all the answers that once preceded questions, the modest yet secure and soothing meaning, though not lost, is transformed. It becomes an enigmatic as all else. Humans cease to identify with it; myth ceases to be the word of their lips. (Patočka 1996, 39–40)

The shaking is engaged with a negative connotative meaning identical to astonishment, shock or disappointment, which arises out of the shaking of the pre-problematic perception of the world, provided by myth. It refers to the moment of transformation of mythical understanding, according to which the human being was led by the omnipotent and fatalistic powers of gods. After the moment of the shaking, one can no longer count on questions being necessarily answerable, as was the case in the pre-problematic world. Primordial understanding of the world is lost. Gods disappeared, and the myth, as the source of understanding, becomes essentially problematic as well. With the transformation of the myth, the human being suddenly finds themselves in a previously unimaginable position. After the shaking, the human being stands in a world in which they are called to search for meaning and for the answers to all questions themselves without any support.

<sup>14</sup> The experience as *Erlebnis* represents a life as it is experienced. It is an open, transient and concrete process of *becoming*. The experience as *Erfahrung*, on the contrary, refers to the life as it is systematised in cultural and intellectual forms (Beasley-Murray 2007, 55).



Patočka, however, belongs to a tradition of thinkers, reaching back to Plato and Aristotle, who believe that philosophy begins with an experience of *wonder*: *thauma archē tēs sofias* (“wonder is the beginning of wisdom”) (ibid. 40). He writes: “We wonder: to wonder means not to accept anything [as] self-evident, to stand still” (Patočka 2007, 55). Nothing but the shaking allows for a new perspective. It is essentially a form of liberation which opens up space for questioning, for a new form of significance and self-understanding.

Shaking, in Patočka’s work, is, therefore, closely related to the category of freedom. Inspired by the philosophy of Heidegger, Patočka understands freedom as “letting being be what it is, not distorting being” (Patočka 1996, 49). Freedom so conceived not only opens a passage for understanding the world (instead of replacing the problematicity of the world with a meaning that would be more convenient), but also such a manifestation of meaning undermines the meaning we used to take for granted. This moment of freedom can be perceived as the revelation of truth (as *alētheia*), which has been hidden. Freedom, as presented by Heidegger and adopted by Patočka, leads to truth and is its main objective: “Freedom, in the end, is freedom for truth, in the form of the uncovering of being itself, of its truth, and not only of what-is” (ibid.). Shaking, therefore, shakes things out of myth and illusion, and they are allowed to manifest themselves as they are. Uncovering of being is, for Patočka, a fundamental aspect that leads to new things—new beginnings—and drives history in its forward movement.

The shaking, Patočka suggests, is a breaking point from which history, philosophy and responsibility emerge (Patočka 2002, xvi). History, for Patočka, stands for “the unfolding of embryonic possibilities present in the shaking” (Patočka 1996, 77). However, while shaking opens up new possibilities, it also calls human beings to carry the movement of history and to adopt a particular perspective and view of the world: to lean into the realm of the nocturnal (ibid. 131), in the sense one is called to open to the problematicity of the world: “humans dare undertake new attempts of bestowing meaning on themselves in the light of the way the being of the world into which they have been set manifests itself to them” (ibid. 40–41).

Patočka characterises history as a conflict between two modes of life: “barren and chained by fear” (ibid. 134) on the one hand, and “life at the peak” (ibid.) on the other. The barren life in fear is preoccupied with the everydayness and its main focus is day-to-day survival and planning for the next day. Patočka argues that the fear comes exactly from this one-sided perspective of seeing the world, our lives and reality from everydayness. Such a voluntary unwillingness to embrace things as they are, however, plays in favour of political powers, which use it to jeopardise and threaten individuals for the sake of their surveillance and obedience (ibid. 125). History, therefore, represents the tension between these two modes of life and one’s ability to understand this tension. Patočka does not urge the adoption of life at the peak straightaway. He is very cautious and argues that one simply needs to understand what history involves.

Shaking, which releases freedom in the service of truth, is not something definitive; it is not a one-off act. As for Patočka, truth is not an ultimate clarity,<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup> “Truth as perfect clarity which knows no obscure places” (Patočka 1996, 50).

but unconcealment, or as stated in his essay “The Spiritual Person and the Intellectual” (1975) that truth is a journey (Patočka 2007, 55). All aspects of human existence are being constantly shaken and re-shaken, and one is called to, actively and restlessly, search for the truth and bestow new meaning. Things are shaken and stripped of all certainty and of being perceived as familiar (Patočka 1996, 144); instead, they manifest themselves as they truly are. Because nothing in the world is certain after shaking, the individual is constantly confronted with an unstable reality, and the only way to avoid being absorbed by a nihilistic meaninglessness is to locate one’s position in the sphere of the shaken and to bind freedom, which the shaking releases, with responsibility (Meacham 2007, 357).

Political life, for Patočka, is a realm of constant shaking. As he argues in his *Heretical essay*, political life “is essentially an unsheltered life” (Patočka 1996, 39). The emotions pervasive in politics—be they fear, anger, envy, hatred or disgust—often are the guiding principle in the political realm (Nussbaum 2018, 12). However, Patočka aims to offer an alternative and propose a community—the solidarity of the shaken, whose guiding principle would be that of truth. Patočka’s emphasis on the truth (as *alētheia*), however, breaks with assumption that the solidarity of the shaken would be founded on ultimate metaphysical truth. The principle of one ultimate truth would lead to another extreme—to religious fanaticism, which is (to a very similar extent) guided by emotions detached from truth. The solidarity of the shaken, in its search for the truth, is set on a journey. They constantly see anew and make collective decisions based on truth as it manifests and reveals itself in the conditions of the very shaking. Patočka does not present freedom in his works as a privilege; it is not a condition in which human beings suddenly find themselves. Rather, freedom represents an agency that is intertwined with responsibility.<sup>16</sup>

## Conclusion

If we perceive Patočka’s *Heretical Essays* as his contribution to the popular discourse on the concept of community (*Gemeinschaft*), these essays not only reveal the source of the crisis in post-war Europe, but also offer a potentially vital solution for overcoming such a crisis. In the 1970s—the age of normalisation in communist Czechoslovakia—Patočka returned to the idea of the frontline trenches and followed the same trajectory as his predecessors Teilhard and Jünger, connecting the individual’s experience of the frontline to the beginning of history. The ambition of such an obscure framing of Patočka’s essays was to highlight the two mainstream nihilistic tendencies of his time.

<sup>16</sup> Shaking in the political realm entails the following: (1) Shaking frees us from the traditional ways of disclosing reality. After shaking, one realises that myth and the meaning we used to rely on are no longer a sufficient resource of meaning. (2) Shaking enables freedom through being open to new forms of perception—that things may not be what they appear to be on the surface. Shaking reveals to us that there is another realm, which was hidden from us before the moment of the shaking. (3) Shaking enables us to make collective decisions based on being liberated from myth and tradition and being able to see the world in a new light.

Patočka calls for the re-focusing of one's attention on what he describes as the orgiastic of the war. This shift of perspective does not aim to awaken an existential sentiment; rather, Patočka realises that the frontline experience (*Fronterlebnis*) allows for a form of constitutive violence (the shaking), which lays ethical foundations for the upheaval of history and allows for the emergence of the solidarity of the shaken—a salvific community that can potentially overcome the crisis and convey a movement of history.

Although Patočka refers to his predecessors' interpretations of the frontline experience, he remains critical towards their very distinctive ideas of the community. The solidarity of the shaken, so conceived, can represent an antidote to Teilhard's idea of the unity in Christ and Jünger's *Frontgemeinschaft*. The solidarity of the shaken, the premises of which are exclusively ethical, represents a community that breaks with the nihilistic tendencies of Patočka's times and, instead, grounds such a community in the groundless abyss of the shaking and truth. The members of the solidarity of the shaken are united by their willingness to embrace the reality as it truly manifests itself and the willingness to respond to its very problematicity.

The solidarity of the shaken from Patočka's perspective is a community which carries out the movement of history. It is the solidarity of those who are capable of embracing history—the conflict between the everyday secure life (the life that is limited by fear) and the life at the peak (the life of the realm of constant shaking, the life in danger, without security that there will be another day). Compared with his predecessors Husserl and Heidegger, who argue that history starts with philosophy, Patočka (as influenced by Arendt's philosophy of *vita activa*) believes that the realm of history cannot be opened up solely by theoretical philosophy. He believes that there must be more to the moment to take “decisions concerning how to act in a concrete situation” (Chvatík 2016, 36) and to take political action in line with these decisions.

## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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