CHAPTER 5

Der Stahlhelm - League of Frontline Soldiers. A right-wing movement in 20th century Germany

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On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the outbreak of the Great War on 3 July 2014, the Franco-German political scientist Alfred Grosser spoke in front of the German parliament. In his speech about the consequences of the war and its meaning for Europe he went into detail about parts of German society after 1918 that refused to accept military defeat in 1918. This led to the 'stab-in-the-back-myth' (*Dolchstoßlegende*) as one of the most influential political legends of the 20th century.[1] According to this narrative, the German troops never had been defeated but were brought down by the weakness and betrayal of their home country. After the war, right-wing political parties and associations utilised this myth to undermine the legitimacy of the Weimar Republic as a direct product of treason and to attack its representatives and supporters.[2] One of these bad actors was the *Stahlhelm - Bund der Frontsoldaten*, which defined itself as a "league of battle-hardened, undefeated German frontline soldiers and of young men, brought to war-readiness by them".[3] In this context, Alfred Grosser brought back into memory a combat league and political movement of the Weimar Republic, which has been in a shadowy existence within historical research, despite its magnitude and importance. In this article, I am going to give an overview about the *Stahlhelm* as a political player and its relations to the National-Socialist movement as the major challenger and rival within the German right of the 1920s and early 1930s. Therefore, in the first chapter I am going to analyse forms of competition between

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[1] Cf. 100. Jahrestag des Beginns des Ersten Weltkriegs. Gedenkstunde im Plenarsaal des Deutschen Bundestages am 3 Juli 2014. Ansprache von Professor Dr. Alfred Grosser <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Bulletin/2010-2015/2014/07/81-2-grosser-gedenken-bt.html> (last access: 21 July 2021).

[2] See Barth, Boris, Dolchstoßlegenden und politische Desintegration. Das Trauma der deutschen Niederlage im Ersten Weltkrieg 1914-1933 (= Schriften des Bundesarchivs Vol. 61), Düsseldorf 2003.

[3] „*Das erlaubte dem bis 1933 immer mächtigeren Stahlhelm, sich folgendermaßen zu definieren: Bund der schlachterprobten, unbesiegt heimgekehrten deutschen Frontsoldaten und der von ihnen zur Wehrhaftigkeit erzogenen Jungmannen*." (100. Jahrestag des Beginns des Ersten Weltkriegs).

the two movements in the commemoration and exploitation of the Great War for political purposes. In the second chapter, I am going to describe their rivalry for dominance within the public space, even leading to violent confrontations. Additionally, I am going to extend the perspective in a short third chapter to the newly founded veterans' organisations after 1945.

1. Overview

The *Stahlhelm* (lit. 'Steel Helmet') was an organisation of German veterans of the First World War, founded in the wake of defeat and the revolution of November 1918. Starting as a non-political association of former soldiers, the first local groups represented organisations of self-defence against revolutionary turmoil and offered their assistance to the newly formed government to maintain law and order. But early on, radical right-wing, authoritarian and anti-democratic tendencies were growing stronger, leading the *Stahlhelm* into an increasingly hostile opposition against the liberal democratic system of the Weimar Republic. After several attempts had failed to win the more radical groups over to the relatively moderate positions of federal leadership, the founder and first *Bundesführer* (federal leader) Franz Seldte neglected to adjust the course of the league. After the dissolution of the post-war troops – a mix of Free Corps formations and other irregular military forces like vigilante groups and self-defence organisations – the *Stahlhelm* incorporated a great number of their former members and absorbed various smaller so-called combat leagues. By doing so, the league rose to become the most important mass movement of the political right, counting 500,000 to 600,000 adherents in the late 1920s.[4] For their annual assemblies (*Reichsfrontsoldatentage*) held between 1925 and 1932, its leadership mobilised up to 200,000 members, occupying public spaces in major German cities, parading on the streets with fully uniformed columns and adding authority to the league's political demands. Its declared main goal as a political movement was the gathering of splintered organisations, leagues as well as political parties

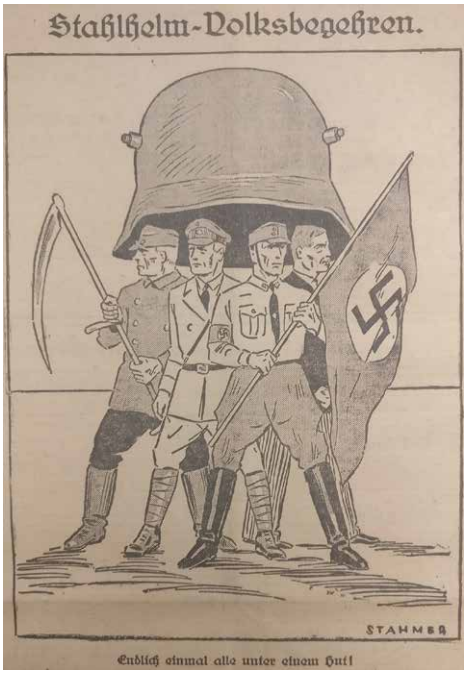
[4] Cf. Elsbach, Sebastian, Das Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold. Republikschutz und politische Gewalt in der Weimarer Republik (Zugl. Diss. Phil., Universität Jena 2018), Stuttgart 2019 (= Weimarer Schriften zur Republik, 10), pp. 117-118.

of the right to forge a strong political coalition and to reshape Germany as an authoritarian state. In this context, the veterans' leaders referred to German history in general and the First World War in particular. As the German people had been brought together by war – they argued – the *true* soldiers of the Great War were meant to rally the nationalistic forces once more. Using the conflict as a great unifier, the German people were to be brought "*unter einen Hut*" (lit. under one hat), meaning to be united for one common purpose: to make Germany a great power again. A caricature in the *Stahlhelm*-related newspaper *Der Alte Dessauer* of 1931 echoed another image in the *Berliner Punsch* magazine of 1866, predicting the German unification under Otto von Bismarck and the Prussian spiked helmet in the Unification Wars 1864 - 1871. The message was clear: Germany was to be united by its soldiers, represented by the typical headgears of their respective era – spiked helmet and steel helmet.

Illust. 1: "Agility, Energy and Courage high, driven by a strong sense for unity; they brought under one hat [united] a great people in thirty days"

Source: Journal *Berliner Punsch*, 25.8.1866

Illust. 2: "Finally all are under one hat" ["finally all are united"].



Source: Der Alte Dessauer, Vol. 8, 15 (11.4.1931)

As an organisation overarching all political parties of the right, from the centre-right to right-wing extremism, the *Stahlhelm* was the main antagonist of the *Reichsbanner Schwarz-Rot-Gold* (lit. Imperial Banner Black-Red-Gold). This movement united members of the parties and other players in support of the parliamentary republic, like Social Democrats, middle-class liberals of the German People's Party and members of the catholic *Zentrum* party.

Despite its right-wing profile, the tensions and rivalry between the league and the rising National-Socialist movement grew stronger, although they joined forces from time to time in order to achieve shared political goals. Throughout the 1920s, National Socialists and other racial extremists attacked the *Stahlhelm* because of the moderate position of its leadership regarding Jews especially. Their aim was to drive a wedge between its leadership and the deeply heterogeneous base, to

provoke defections and weaken the rival for domination within the political right.[5] In 1922, Seldte himself had declared that as far as he was concerned, there were "no Jews or Non-Jews, only *Stahlhelm* members"[6] in his association. One of his closest colleagues, the leader of the Bavarian federal organisation, retired major Carl Ritter von Wäninger, distanced himself and his followers explicitly from the early National Socialists. In a circular letter to all groups in Bavaria he criticised their radical anti-Semitism:

"In my opinion it is detrimental foolishness, if a poor and devastated country like Germany would believe to be able to solve its problems by jew-baiting."[7]

In the 1920s, however, the veterans' organisation was a rising star within right-wing politics while the National-Socialist movement could not achieve significant successes at the ballot box outside Bavaria. Seldte and his supporters therefore could argue from a position of strength. After numerous attacks in the National Socialistic press, Wilhelm Heinz as editor of the league's newspaper condemned this behaviour in an article on the front page titled "The Frontline of the Decent!" (*Die Front der Anständigen!*), while supreme leader Seldte published an open letter to Adolf Hitler, threatening to crush his movement.[8] However, as a player attempting to unite the political right entirely, the *Stahlhelm* could not afford to break with the right-wing extremists. Especially in Munich as place of origin and early stronghold of the *NSDAP* (National Socialist Worker's Party) even Wäninger had to admit that he needed the Nazis, because they represented "the best activists".[9] Furthermore, by the end of the 1920s the *Stahlhelm* leadership realised that a great part of the base sympathised with the National Socialists or were

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5 Cf. Longerich, Peter, Geschichte der SA, München 2003, pp. 70-71.

6 „nicht Juden oder Nichtjuden, sondern Stahlhelmleute" (Berghahn, Volker R., Der Stahlhelm Bund der Frontsoldaten 1918-1935 [Zugl. Diss. Phil Universität London 1964], Düsseldorf 1966 [= Beiträge zur Geschichte des Parlamentarismus und der politischen Parteien, 33], p. 66).

7 "„Ich halte es für eine schädliche Torheit, wenn ein so armes, heute am Boden liegendes Land wie Deutschland glauben sollte, durch Judenhetze diese Frage lösen zu können […]" (Wäninger to all Bavarian local branches, 24 April 1924 [Bavarian Main Public Record Office, Section IV, Stahlhelm No. 347, fol. 4]).

8 See *Die Front der Anständigen!* Der Stahlhelm Vol. 8, No. 15 (11 April 1926).

9 Protokoll der Bundesvorstandssitzung, 21.5.1926, p. 7 (Federal Archives, R72/5 fol. 105).

even in favour of their movement.[10] At the same time, Hitler and his supporters came to the conclusion that by attacking the more conservative forces, they had boxed themselves into a corner and ran the risk of isolation.[11] As a consequence, the NSDAP mitigated its tone and neglected to attack the league on the basis of anti-Semitism. Instead, its agitators focussed on the *Stahlhelm*'s policy, the lack of revolutionary dynamics and inner coherence. This development combined with the rising significance of the NSDAP paved the way for cooperation at the highest level. In 1929 and 1931, both protagonists participated in committees for the preparation of political petitions and referendums. The first petition was aimed against the acceptance of the Young Plan by the German government that was crafted to regulate the payment of reparations while the second targeted the dissolution of the Prussian state parliament, in which republican parties held the majority. After the failure of both attempts, this alliance nonetheless ruptured and National Socialists resumed their attacks. In autumn 1931, when the members of the self-declared 'National Opposition' met for a big rally in Bad Harzburg, the *Stahlhelm* leadership refused to support the candidacy of Hitler for the German presidential election in the following year and thus to submit to the demands of the National Socialists for domination. As a result, the conflicts between the two organisations escalated, eventually leading to violent clashes. In the final months of the Weimar Republic it was frequently impossible to distinguish whom the storm troopers of the *Sturmabteilung* (SA) and the Nazi agitators hated more – Marxists or *Stahlhelm* members.[12] In January 1933, however, when Hitler was appointed chancellor, Franz Seldte became Secretary of Labour because President Paul von Hindenburg – a former Field Marshall of the Prussian Army and Chief of the Great General Staff – had an affection for the veterans' league. The conflicts nevertheless continued, finally resulting in its dissolution in November 1935.

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[10] Cf. Lenz an Bundesamt, 24 June 1929 (Bavarian Main Public Record Office, Section IV, Stahlhelm 79); Protokoll Bundesvorstandssitzung, 22/23 March 1930 (Federal Archives, R72/13, fol. 61); cf. also Nußer, Horst G. W., Konservative Wehrverbände in Bayern, Preußen und Österreich 1918-1933. Mit einer Biographie von Georg Escherich 1870-1941, München 1973, p. 286.

[11] Cf. Rösch, Mathias, Die Münchner NSDAP 1925-1933. Eine Untersuchung zur inneren Struktur der NSDAP in der Weimarer Republik, München 2002 (= Studien zur Zeitgeschichte, 63) (Zugl. Diss. Phil., Universität München 1998), pp. 157-165, 170-177.

[12] Cf. Berghahn, Der Stahlhelm, p. 243.

2. The Great War and Paramilitary Politics

As a veterans' organisation, the *Stahlhelm* referred heavily on the personal experience of war and tried to link it to its self-image as a political movement (*Bewegung*). In this regard there were distinct differences between the league and National Socialism, challenging its attempts to unite the right under one banner. Derived from the first Battle of the Somme in 1916, in which German troops successfully defended against the material superiority of the British and French, the *Stahlhelm* developed a distinct image of heroism, fitting the self-image of its members and its politics. It focussed on 'strength of nerve', 'endurance', 'hardiness', as well as on an 'activism' tamed by 'strict discipline'. It laid the emphasis on the common soldiers of trench warfare fulfilling their duty. This ideal correlates with the research findings of military historians arguing that most of the soldiers were neither motivated by gushing euphoria for war, nor were they willing to breach their obligations.[13] Seldte himself had participated in the Battle of the Somme as a company commander and had lost his left forearm due to severe injuries. After the war, he processed his experiences in two novels and a stage play, which premiered after the consecration of the first *Stahlhelm* flag in the dome of Magdeburg in 1921. According to several articles published in veterans' newspapers, the idea of the league corresponded with a mentality, brought to life by the barrages in the Battle of the Somme the soldiers had endured; "there lies the birthplace of a new Germany" another article claimed. The valiant assault as an attribute of heroism had been replaced by ideas of steadfastness.[14] Similar images of a new, defensive kind of heroism in industrial mass warfare can be found among former enemies and allies, as letters of French frontline soldiers

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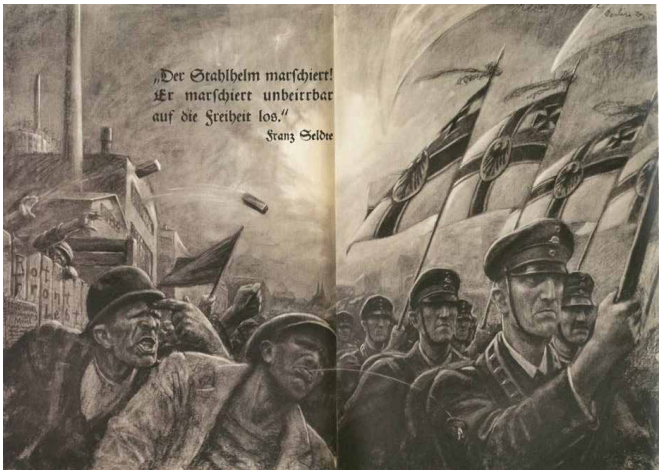
[13] Cf. Stachelbeck, Christian, Deutschlands Heer und Marine im Ersten Weltkrieg, München 2013 (= Beiträge zur Militärgeschichte, 5), p. 188.

[14] Cf. Münkler, Herfried, Der Große Krieg. Die Welt 1914 bis 1918, 4th Ed., Berlin 2014, p. 463, 466; For articles in *Stahlhelm*-sources concerning the battle of the Somme 1916 cf. Der Werdegang des Stahlhelm (= Feldgraue Hefte Vol. 1); (Federal Archives, R72/334 Vol. 2), fol. 13; Goes, Gustav, Das Magdeburger Inf.-Regt. 66 - die Wiege des Stahlhelm. In: Stahlhelm-Jahrbuch 1927, im Auftrage der Bundesleitung des „Stahlhelm", Bund der Frontsoldaten. Hrsg. von Franz Schauwecker, Magdeburg 1927 (Federal Archives, R72/337), p. 48; *Juli 1916 an der Somme*, Der Stahlhelm Vol. 8, No. 32 (8 August 1926).

and perceptions of Austro-Hungarian veterans in the inter-war period show.[15] As a movement, the league should therefore proceed in the moderate *Tempo 114*, the marching speed of the Prussian infantry since 1888 – slow but relentless and unstoppable, untouched by pushbacks and setbacks in the political sphere. As the members had endured the horrors of war they should now remain loyal to their movement even in face of misfortunes and the absence of concrete political victories. This self-image is best represented in a caricature in a propaganda booklet of 1932:

Illust. 3: "The *Stahlhelm* marches! It marches unflinchingly towards freedom."



Source: Die Stahlhelm-Fibel (Tempo 114). ed. by the Propaganda-Section of the Stahlhelm Federal Office, Berlin 1932

On the right side, it shows a marching column of the *Stahlhelm* with flag

[15] Cf. Ulrich, Bernd, und Benjamin Ziemann, Das soldatische Kriegserlebnis. In: Eine Welt von Feinden, pp. 127-158, 237-240; Beaupré, Nicolas, Kriegserfahrungen, Zeitempfinden und Erwartungen französischer Soldaten im Jahr 1916. In: Materialschlachten 1916. Ereignis, Bedeutung, Erinnerung. Im Auftrag des Zentrums für Militärgeschichte und Sozialwissenschaften der Bundeswehr, Hrsg. von Christian Stachelbeck, Paderborn [u.a.] 2016 (= Zeitalter der Weltkriege, 17), p. 338f; Hofer, Hans-Georg, Nervenschwäche und Krieg. Modernitätskritik und Krisenbewältigung in der österreichischen Psychatrie (1880-1920), Vienna [et al.] 2004, pp. 267-280.

bearers in front, marching towards the right edge. The veterans bypass an industrial complex and a crowd of workers, clearly depictured as political lefties, attacking them. They berate the marchers and throw bricks at them. One of the workers in the foreground spits at the flag bearer closest to the viewer. The *Stahlhelm* members, however, meet these attacks, as the uniform facial expressions of grim determination imply, with discipline and 'strength of nerve'. They stay focussed on the destination of the march and there are no observable hints for an imminent aggressive reaction. This scene is marked with a quote of Seldte: "The *Stahlhelm* marches! It marches unflinchingly towards freedom."

At the same time, the *Stahlhelm* leadership made a point that this self-imposed deceleration was not to be mistaken for numbness, immobility or even apathy. As the German Army in retrospect had never fallen back into full-on defence and as it had been able to attack the enemy again and again, the veterans' league should be able to do the same. This hardiness, combined with flexibility and tonicity, corresponded with an aspect of the steel helmet itself – in the fusion of chrome nickel steel and rubber and their characteristics. Their attributes were then transferred to the (former) German frontline soldier.[16] This image correlated with the political strategy and the inner necessities of the organisation. As already mentioned, its leaders tried to unite the political right as a whole, forcing them to spend a lot of time and energy to balance the differences and contrary interests of the various players, prohibiting any calls for fast and determined changes of the political system. Additionally, as a collective basin of the paramilitary right, the *Stahlhelm*'s base itself had become extremely heterogeneous, hindering its leadership to formulate a correspondent political programme. A report by a referee Ludwig within the federal leadership of May 1926 clearly conveys the resulting lack of inner coherence:

"Today, it is the case that we are divided in districts, which represent regional organisations of self-defence, those, in which the *Stahlhelm* fights the Reds, others, in which the *Stahlhelm* is indeed nothing more than a warriors' association,

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[16] Cf. Sonderausstellung. Stahlhelme vom Ersten Weltkrieg bis zur Gegenwart. Friedrich Schwerd, dem Konstrukteur des Deutschen Stahlhelms, zum Gedächtnis. Bearbeitet von Jürgen Kraus, Ingolstadt 1984 (= Veröffentlichungen des Bayerischen Armeemuseums, 8), pp. 82-83.

a traditions club, politically uninterested and without political will."[17]

The resulting perception of indecisiveness and sluggishness, however, became a real threat when the league was confronted with National Socialism, which presented itself as a youthful, determined, even revolutionary movement, promising to overcome the crisis of the late Weimar years with radical velocity. Thus, it is no coincidence that fascists in general and National Socialists in particular preferred the image of the 'storm troopers' of the Great War when utilizing it for political purposes. These formations had had the task to attack key positions of the enemy by surprise, to destroy machine gun positions as well as dugouts and to pave the way for the assault of the conventional troops. Storm trooper formations consisted of young volunteers who were physically tough, mentally resilient, and unmarried. They had undergone specialised military training and were equipped with state-of-the-art weaponry available, designed to fight in close quarters. Therefore, a prominent battle of the Great War to refer to was the Battle of Verdun. Other than the Battle of the Somme in the same year, the Germans had been on the attack and thus narratives about the battle revolved around keen assaults on concrete targets.[18] The elite status and aggressive tactics of the German storm troopers were to be transferred to the political activism of the National Socialists movement in general and its combat league in particular. The *Stahlhelm* meanwhile tried to mitigate the right-wing extremists' activism and to win them over to support its more conservative politics. Hardiness to hold a conquered position and the defence were as important as the verve of the attacker, the propaganda of the league claimed in 1932. This is why the veterans wanted to turn the virtues of traditional German soldiership to become the foundation and the restraining force for the forward-storming, national idealism of

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[17] „*Heute liegen die Dinge doch so, wir teilen uns immer noch in Bezirke, die landschaftsgemäss Selbstschutzorganisationen darstellen, solche, in denen der Stahlhelm gegen rot kämpft, andere, in denen der Stahlhelm in der Tat nichts anderes als ein Kriegerverein, ein Traditionsbund, politisch uninteressiert und ohne politischen Willen ist*." (Minutes of the federal board meeting on 21 May 1926 [Federal Archives, R72/5, fol. 112]).

[18] Cf. Krumeich, Gerd, Die deutsche Erinnerung an die Somme. In: Die Deutschen an der Somme 1914-1918. Krieg, Besatzung, Verbrannte Erde. Hrsg. von Gerhard Hirschfeld, Gerd Krumeich und Irina Renz, Essen 2006, p. 323.

the German youth.[19] It is fair to assume that the National Socialists were addressed here, considering the conflict of generations as an aspect of the escalating rivalry between the two movements[20] and the political weight the NSDAP had gained until the *Reichstag* elections of November 1932.

3. Steel Helmet against Swastika – Conflicts in Political Symbolism

The confrontations between the two self-declared movements were mostly carried out in the sphere of political symbolism which had become a subject for historical research of its own. Previous studies on the downfall of the Weimar Republic had concluded that the symbols of democracy and republicanism were inferior to those of National Socialism and that this inferiority contributed to their end.[21] Historians today are describing a struggle for and against the Weimar Republic at eye level by the means of political symbols. Paramilitary formations on both sides tried to dominate public spaces with uniforms and flags, with songs and hymns, tried to remove symbols of the opponent or to outperform them.[22] This kind of confrontation could also be found within the right wing. The first leader of the Bavarian *Stahlhelm* formation, Wäninger, for example not only rejected the extreme anti-Semitism of the National Socialists but prohibited the exhibition of swastikas and the singing of songs of "similar tendency" at his league's events.[23] By doing so, he limited the extremists' ability to attract attention and to promote their

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[19] *„Es gilt, die Tugenden des alten deutschen Soldatentums zur Grundlage und zur zügelnden Kraft des vorwärtsstürmenden nationalen Idealismus der deutschen Jugend zu machen. Auf die Zähigkeit im Festhalten einmal eroberter Stellungen und im Abwehrkampf kommt es ebenso sehr an wie auf den Schwung des Angriffsgeistes*." (Über den Parteien. In: Die Stahlhelm-Fibel, o. P.).

[20] Cf. Weinrich, Arndt, Der Weltkrieg als Erzieher. Jugend zwischen Weimarer Republik und Nationalsozialismus, Essen 2013 (= Schriften der Bibliothek für Zeitgeschichte NF, 27), pp. 152-177; Olenhusen, Irmtraut Götz von, Vom Jungstahlhelm zur SA. Die junge Nachkriegsgeneration in den paramilitärischen Verbänden der Weimarer Republik. In: Politische Jugend in der Weimarer Republik. Hrsg. von Wolfgang Krabbe, Bochum 1993 (= Dortmunder historische Studien, 7), pp. 146-182.

[21] Cf. Buchner, Bernd, Um nationale und republikanische Identität. Sozialdemokratie und der Kampf um die politischen Symbole in der Weimarer Republik in der Weimarer Republik, Bonn 2001 (= Politik und Gesellschaftsgeschichte, 57), pp. 14-16, 361-362.

[22] Cf. Rossol, Nadine, Flaggenkrieg am Badestrand. Lokale Möglichkeiten repräsentativer Mitgestaltung in der Weimarer Republik. In: Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaft Vol. 56 (2008) 7/8, pp. 615-637; Heise, Robert, und Daniel Watermann, Vereinsforschung in der Erweiterung. Historische und sozialwissenschaftliche Perspektiven. In: Geschichte und Gesellschaft Vol. 43 (2017) p. 8, 13.

[23] Cf. Notes of the board meeting 5 October 1924 (Bavarian State Archives, Section IV Stahlhelm No. 330).

cause. When the league held its 10th annual assembly (*Reichsfrontsoldatentag*) in Munich, it challenged the National Socialists in one of their early strongholds. Over 100,000 veterans travelled to the Bavarian capital and several massive events dominated the public space. After a rally in the famous *Löwenbräukeller*, marching columns formed up at the war memorial in front of the Bavarian Army Museum. Famous German military leaders of the Great War, like Field Marshal August von Mackensen, Admiral Alfred von Tirpitz, Colonel General Felix von Bothmer as well as the Bavarian Secretary of the Judiciary, attended the event as guests of honour. Subsequently, the veterans moved into the Dante Stadium in Western Munich carrying 2,300 banners. Following the ceremonial Grand Tattoo (*Großer Zapfenstreich*), the first day of the event concluded with fireworks illuminating the night sky. But the main event followed the day after when tens of thousands of uniformed men paraded in front of the assembled *Stahlhelm* leadership along a central major street in Munich, the *Prinzregentenstraße*.

During the preparations for the event, Adolf Hitler had been invited as an honoured guest as well, but he had refused to attend and stayed away from the city ostentatiously. Instead, he sent the future governor (*Reichsstatthalter*) of Bavaria, Franz Ritter von Epp, to represent the NSDAP. Additionally, he ordered his storm troopers to treat the visiting *Stahlhelm* members friendly and to volunteer as city guides. At the same time, however, Hitler had given strict orders prohibiting them to participate in the marches.[24] Under no circumstances should the impression arise that the Nazi "brown shirts" became a mere attachment of the grey-uniformed masses of the *Stahlhelm* or that the storm troopers were about to be absorbed. On the contrary, the National Socialists seized the opportunity to demonstrate their claimed modernity and superiority over the veterans' organisation. The Munich police department reported the employment of an aircraft during the event, advertising for the National Socialists' newspaper *Der Völkische Beobachter*.[25] In an article, the National Socialists depicted how the airplane had been greeted by the cheering crowd as it circled over their heads, forcing everyone to look at

[24] Cf. Abstract of the report by the Munich police headquarters No. 79, 8 July 1929 (State Archives Munich, Pol. Dir München 10038, fol. 55).
[25] Ibid.

the Swastika high above in the sky over Munich.[26] The constellation itself had a strong symbolic character. Down there, the seasoned veterans of the Great War were deployed, in their field-grey uniforms, wielding the colours of the bygone German Empire and goose-stepped in the Prussian marching speed of *Tempo 114*, introduced in 1888. High above, a plane as a symbol of modernity as well as of speed and dynamics carried the symbols of the National Socialist movement.[27] When the *Stahlhelm* rallied its members again in Koblenz one year later and welcomed a delegation of Italian Fascists the league itself employed an aircraft to underline his claim to be a modern nationalistic movement as well.[28]

After the festivities had ended, however, the *Stahlhelm*'s presence in Munich was threatened to be over-shadowed by its extremist rivals. Meanwhile the two organisations had agreed to cooperate in a committee to prepare a petition against the acceptance of the Young Plan and sub-committees were formed in the whole country. During the preparation for the first session of the Bavarian Sub-committee a few months after the *Reichsfrontsoldatentag*, the new leader of the veterans' association, retired Colonel Hermann Ritter von Lenz, faced the challenge to claim the public space for the *Stahlhelm* without tens of thousands of supporters from all over the country gathered in the city. During a rally, where Hitler, Alfred Hugenberg – the chairman of the German National People's Party (*DNVP*) – and Lenz himself would appear for example, the veterans and the storm troopers were ordered to provide stewardship. To counter the "brown shirts" with their standard bearers, who were to be placed in the centre of the shared stage, it was necessary, the *Stahlhelm* leader of Munich wrote, that the league demonstrated its power by mobilising as many members as possible and to let them march in closed formations. As opposed to the mass event a few months earlier, the veterans were threatened to be pushed in the background. When another event was held in the *Cirkus Krone* one year later, Lenz even refused to officially invite the National

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[26] Cf. *Der deutsche Soldat*, in: Der Völkische Beobachter (Bavarian Edition) Vol. 1929, No. 126 (4 July 1929) (City Archives Munich, ZA-14361).

[27] For further analysis of the employment of planes and pilots for the representation of German National Socialism and Italian Fascism see Esposito, Fernando, Fascism, Aviation and Mythical Modernity, Basingstoke 2015.

[28] See articles titled *Der Tag des Aufmarsches* und *Die Ehrengäste*, in: Der Stahlhelm Vol. 12, No. 40 (5 October 1930).

Socialists. He was worried about the presence of too many "brown shirts", which could dwarf his grey-uniformed followers. In other cities and regions storm troopers disturbed gatherings and rallies of the league by interjections, by chanting the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* – an infamous Nazi battle song – and by raising the right arm, performing the Hitler salute. In regions like Franconia, another early stronghold of National Socialism, the veterans moved on to hold rallies in coterie to prevent the rival organisation from exploiting them, thus limiting their range and effectiveness of addressing potential supporters and new members. In part, these counter-measures seemed quite desperate indeed. When Hitler came to the city of Regensburg and attracted 1,500 people the local *Stahlhelm* leader decided to 'walk around' the city with some members to demonstrate that they were "still alive", as he wrote. When another leader attended a Nazi rally he was shocked about the dominance of the Swastika and the small children, raising the right arm for the Hitler salute. Again and again, the veterans were outshined by the presence of their rival organisation in the public sphere. In their rising tensions, the Swastika also stood against the steel helmet as the league's symbol. The veterans tried to dominate public squares and halls with grey-uniformed bodies and outnumber the "brown shirts". On the other hand, National Socialists tried to overtone the hymn of the league by singing the anthem of the NSDAP.[29]

Sometimes though, these conflicts led to violent clashes, especially after the league's leadership had refused to support the candidacy of Hitler in the German Presidential Election in 1932. Violence reached another climax one year later, after Hitler had been appointed Chancellor of the German Reich. After his inauguration, it emerged that the *Stahlhelm* would not be allowed to persist as an independent organisation – even though *Bundesführer* Seldte had become a member of the new cabinet. In this situation, he and especially Theodor Duesterberg, the influential second federal leader, tried to preserve the league facing the totalitarian efforts of the National Socialists. Duesterberg even attacked them in public and addressed former opponents – members of the republican veteran associations and political parties which were even more threatened. As early as February 1933, he declared

[29] Cf. Werberg, Dennis, Stahlhelm – Nationalsozialismus – Neue Rechte. Der Frontsoldatenbund und sein Verhältnis zum Rechtsextremismus 1918 – 2000 (working title, to be published).

that there were hundreds of thousands of former frontline soldiers amongst the Socialists and Catholics whose patriotism was not to be judged by the NSDAP. Apparently, it was his goal to convince the former opponents to join the *Stahlhelm* ranks to strengthen its position. As a consequence, the regime intensified the pressure on Seldte to deprive Duesterberg from power. In April 1933, Seldte succumbed to the pressure and ousted his colleague. After that, negotiations began and the transfer of the youngest *Stahlhelm* members into the *SA* was prepared for autumn 1933. Only the eldest adherents were to remain under Seldte's direct control. At the same time, however, as Duesterberg and his supporters had wished, a substantial number of Social Democrats, Liberals and Conservatives – members of the dissolved political parties and associations – joined their ranks.[30] By enquiring those former opponents, the leaders on the subordinated levels tried to strengthen their position as negotiations went on for the league's future alongside the National Socialist fighting organisations, *Sturmabteilung* and *Schutzstaffel*. As a consequence, the membership figures roughly doubled, reaching between 750,000 and one million adherents in May 1933. The new leader of the Bavarian branch in Munich, retired cavalry captain, historian and archivist Otto von Waldenfels assessed this development as success "very substantial but yet sometimes quite undesirable" because it gave the National Socialists an excuse for brutal interventions.[31] The most famous incident occurred on 27 March 1933 in Brunswick, where the *Reichsbanner* was about to be incorporated in the veterans' ranks when Prime Minister Klagges (NSDAP) ordered to dissolve a joint rally by force. Two thousand *Stahlhelm* members as well as over one thousand 'Marxists' were arrested, the local branch of the *Stahlhelm* was dissolved and Klagges spread the message of a planned *coup d'état* by the joint veterans. Another incident occurred in late June in the region of Lauterecken in Western-Palatinate. In this sparsely populated, rural area, several new local groups had been founded under great participation of Social Democrats. In the night of 23 June 1933, 300 storm troopers and workers from the near National Socialist labour camp were rallied

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[30] Cf. Meinl, Susanne, Nationalsozialisten gegen Hitler. Die nationalrevolutionäre Opposition um Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz, Berlin 2000, pp. 187-188.

[31] Cf. Waldenfels, Otto Freiherr von, Der Leidensweg des Stahlhelm, p. 9 (Bavarian Main Public Record Office, Section IV, Stahlhelm No. 361).

in the town of Wolfstein, the place where the district leadership of the *Stahlhelm* was located. Following the abuse and arrest of a Catholic priest, the mob stormed the homes of the district leader, retired Sergeant Franz Eduard Klinger, and his closest co-workers. The men were dragged out of their beds in their nightdresses and arrested while being brutally abused and beaten. In the following days, the health condition of Klinger deteriorated and he was subsequently hospitalised in the regional capital city of Kaiserslautern where he died on 4 July 1933.[32] This incident, combined with either the inability or the unwillingness of federal leadership to protect its adherents led to the breakdown of the whole organisation in Western-Palatinate. In protest and in fear of further assaults many *Stahlhelm* leaders resigned and gave way for successors more compliant to the new rulers. In the end, all attempts of the veterans to strengthen their position and to prevail were in vain. After a greater part of the members had been transferred to the storm trooper formations and after Hitler had declared the rearmament of Germany in 1935, the last remains of the veterans' organisation were dissolved. Many joined the National Socialist party, the warriors' associations of the *Kyffhäuserbund*, already brought into line by the Nazi regime, and other conform organisations.[33]

4. Old Steel Helmets in a New Germany

However, some of the former *Stahlhelm* members went underground and upheld secretive meetings. The former local groups were concealed as clubs for sports and leisure activities. After the end of the Second World War, these *Stahlhelm connections* re-surfaced, at first without any coordination. Until the end of 1950, as a member wrote in an open letter, approximately ten different groups and "God knows how many regulars' tables" had been established.[34] These gatherings belonged to the many soldiers' associations in Germany after

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[32] Cf. Werberg, Stahlhelm – Nationalsozialismus – Neue Rechte (to be published).

[33] Cf. Gestapo Hannover meldet … Polizei- und Regierungsberichte für das mittlere und südliche Niedersachsen zwischen 1933 und 1937. Bearbeitet von Klaus Mlynek, Hildesheim 1986, p. 460, 483, 493; Hering, Rainer, Konstruierte Nation. Der Alldeutsche Verband 1890 bis 1939, Hamburg 2003 (= Hamburger Beiträge zur Sozial- und Zeitgeschichte, 40), p. 158.

[34] Cf. Open letter of Rosbach to the first district leader of Oldenburg, 31 December 1950 (Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution, Zentrales Altaktenwesen (ZAW), No. 2735, p. 192).

the war, counting between one to two thousand organisations.[35] In February 1951, the league was founded anew as "successor organisation of Duesterberg's *Stahlhelm*" in Frankfurt. With regard to its personnel, ideology, political strategy and symbols there were strong continuities to the old league. Among the founders were numerous leaders and members of the federal leadership and confidants of the former *Bundesführer*. The most senior officials, however, Seldte and Duesterberg, had already passed away. The German steel helmet of the Great War as well as the colours of the old German Monarchy – Black-White-Red – remained the most important symbols. In terms of the political agenda the original members agreed on a 12-point-programme with great resemblance to their official statements until 1933.[36] Their declared goals included the gathering of former frontline soldiers and officers to build a coalition overarching the political parties of the right and to overcome the differences dividing the nation on the basis of war experience. But different from the Weimar years, the new leadership was not able to integrate the diverging factions within, ranging from members loyal to the German post-war government of Konrad Adenauer, radical and paramilitary enemies of democracy as well as non-political veterans. The tensions between them, combined with the renewed outbreak of conflicts between the supporters of the two former *Bundesführer* resulted in the fragmentation of the organisation. First, the new leader, a confidant of Duesterberg, retired Sergeant Carl Simon, was forced out by Thomas Girgensohn, a former high-ranking official within the storm troopers and top-brass supporter of Seldte. Simon then formed an organisation of his own and fought the league at every opportunity. Another fracture occurred when his successor, retired Field Marshal Albert Kesselring, announced his plans for the league to equate the colours of the German Republic, Black-Red-Gold, with the association's colours stemming from the German Empire, Black-

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[35] Schweinsberg estimates the number of soldier organisations at 1,000 while Thomas Kühne suggests that there were around 2,000 organisations (cf. Schweinsberg, Krafft Freiherr Schenck zu, Die Soldatenverbände in der Bundesrepublik. In: Studien zur politischen und gesellschaftlichen Situation der Bundeswehr, ed. by Georg Picht, Berlin 1965 (= Forschungen und Berichte der evangelischen Studiengemeinschaft, 21), p. 105; Kühne, Thomas, Kameradschaft. Die Soldaten des nationalsozialistischen Krieges und das 20. Jahrhundert, Göttingen 2006 (= Kritische Studien zur Geschichtswissenschaft, 173), p. 93).

[36] Cf. Tauber, Kurt P., Beyond eagle and swastika. German nationalism since 1945, Middletown 1967, pp. 320-321.

White-Red. Additionally he planned to open up membership to Social Democrats and members of trade unions. As a consequence, uproar shook the veterans' organisation to its core. Following this, several branches separated and formed another organisation, the *Bund der Frontsoldaten* (League of Frontline Soldiers) with a strong militant and anti-socialist profile. The remaining league itself was split between veterans supporting the first *Bundesführer* Kesselring, the chief of the *Bundesamt* (the federal office of administration) Girgensohn and the second *Bundesführer* Lehmann. Since the organisation remained stuck in its ways as a veterans' association of the Great War, it was barely able to address the veterans of the Second World War, causing the organisation to overage as the years went by.[37]

When Kesselring's successor Kurt Barth died in 1964, the league changed its course. To free themselves from the claim to power of Girgensohn, the regional association leaders united and pushed one of their own, retired First Lieutenant and bearer of the *Ritterkreuz* – one of the highest awards in the military of Nazi Germany – Wilhelm Massa, to become *Bundesführer*. He disempowered his internal enemies, broke with the Federal Republic of Germany and integrated the league in the network of already existing far-right organisations and political parties. He managed to stabilise the shrinking base and to attract new members – even young people who attended paramilitary training provided by the veterans.[38] Nevertheless, several branches of the association were able to build and maintain contacts with garrisons of the Federal Armed Forces of Germany (*Bundeswehr*). The veterans wanted to influence the new German military and be recognised as former soldiers with war experience. Many high-ranking military officers on the other hand were planning to utilise the *Stahlhelm* as one of the more reliable soldiers' associations to further recruit personnel and strengthen the willingness to serve in the regular armed forces. Especially in the late 1960s, a general trend in German society for liberalisation gained ground. Protest movements called for disarmament and negotiations with the Eastern Bloc to preserve peace. From the viewpoint of conservatives and traditionalists inside and outside the military,

[37] Cf. Supplementary Report, 1 February 1955 (Federal Archives. BW7/2754, fol. 130. 134, 136).
[38] Cf. Werberg, Stahlhelm – Nationalsozialismus – Neue Rechte (to be published).

this development threatened the ability of the armed forces to provide national defence.[39] The cooperation with soldiers' organisations was therefore used to balance this trend. Occasionally, these connections incriminated the military and the German Federal Ministry of Defence when they became public. The best-known incident took place in the spa town of Bad Bergzabern in the federal state of Rhineland-Palatinate where a new local group of the *Stahlhelm* was established in 1966. At the founding event, a number of soldiers of Signal Battalion 768 stationed nearby participated and a non-commissioned officer of the *Bundeswehr* assumed a leading function. During this event, a former functionary of the NSDAP delivered a speech about the defence against Bolshevism as a great historic accomplishment of National Socialism, relativised the mass murder of the European Jews and announced another march to the east.[40] In consequence, the new group was dissolved and the soldiers who had initiated the event received disciplinary action. The Parliamentary Commissioner of the German Armed Forces (*Wehrbeauftragter*) demanded to intensify education for the soldiers and one year later, the German Federal Ministry of Defence published the first official, critical depiction about the *Stahlhelm* in the Weimar Republic, based on historical studies.[41]

In 1975, after more than ten years in office, *Bundesführer* Wilhelm Massa resigned. His successor initiated another course, distancing himself from right-wing extremists and focussing on military tradition and camaraderie. This change resulted in more tensions, withdrawals and exclusions. In the end, around 730 members remained in total. Because of its shrinking influence and since there were no more extremist tendencies at the executive level, the German Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) stopped monitoring the league. In the 1990s, the *Stahlhelm* got into the focus for

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[39] Cf. Dörfler-Dierken, Angelika, Die Bedeutung der Jahre 1968 und 1981 für die Bundeswehr. Gesellschaft und Bundeswehr. Integration oder Abschottung? Baden-Baden 2010 (= Militär und Sozialwissenschaften, 44), pp. 26-31.

[40] Cf. Bill of Indictment, pp. 3-4; Letter of the German Federal Disciplinary Attorney (Bundesdisziplinaranwalt) to the German Federal Ministry of Defence 1 June 1966 (Federal Archives, BW1/66145).

[41] Cf. Annual Report of the Parliamentary Commissioner of the Armed Forces (*Wehrbeauftragter*) 1965, p. 13; *Der Stahlhelm. Der Bund der Frontsoldaten in der Weimarer Republik*, in: Information für die Truppe. Hefte für staatsbürgerliche Bildung und geistige Rüstung Vol. 5 (1967), pp. 316-329.

one last time in some minor regional newspapers in Lower Saxony. The media reported about a *Franz-Seldte-Haus* and a training ground on which right-wing extremists conducted military exercises. Lastly, in the year 2000 the league's leadership decided to dissolve the organisation at the federal level, presumably to avoid prosecution for attempts to import items with prohibited Nazi symbols into Germany. After that, the league's last signs of life faded from the records as well as from the right and far right activities in Germany.

5. Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion: The *Stahlhelm - Bund der Frontsoldaten* was a right-wing movement in Germany in the 20th century and a last attempt to gather the political right on the eve of the National Socialist regime. As such, its leadership was a right-wing competitor and rival of the National Socialists while a great part of the basis in fact sympathised with the latter. The rising tensions between the two players manifested in a clash of symbols in which the steel helmet, formations of field-grey uniformed men, Imperial War Flags, hymns, as well as salutes competed against the Nazi symbols: swastika, brown shirts, the *Horst-Wessel-Lied* and the Hitler salute. Between 1933 and 1935, the *Stahlhelm* became one of the last melting pots of possible opposition members and paradoxically a basin for Social Democrats, Liberals and other Conservatives. The reasons for these new members to join were as diverse as their political background. Some were fundamentally opposed to the Nazi regime and tried to resist it or just sought shelter from persecution. Others sympathised with the idea of a new German *Reich* and wanted to participate in its establishment but felt deterred by the revolutionary appeal of the Nazi storm troopers. There were also those who just wanted to uphold their personal connections within a non-National-Socialist organisation, as well as the functionaries who wanted to keep their independence. In most cases, however, the opposition of the latter was not fundamental. Therefore, it would be wrong to glorify the *Stahlhelm* in the last years of its existence as a bastion of resistance against National Socialism. On the whole, this veterans' league represented not pure fascists, even though a major part of its members sympathised with fascism. It represented an anti-liberal, authoritarian current within the German right-

wing, somewhere between the monarchists of old and the other, more extreme representatives of the new right. Its leaders had fought parliamentary democracy more and more viciously and had welcomed the concentration of political power in the hands of the German President, Field Marshall von Hindenburg. Therefore, the *Stahlhelm* had paved the way for the rise of National Socialism and the ultimate downfall of democracy. In any case, the National Socialists continued their fight against their old rival.

After the league had been dissolved, the *Stahlhelm* veterans upheld their connections and continued to meet, concealed as clubs for sports and leisure activities. After the total defeat and occupation of Germany in World War 2, these groups resurfaced and tried to re-establish the organisation with modest success. The unwillingness or inability to adapt combined with internal tensions between different factions led to a general decline. The league was not able to regain the position it had held as the most potent right-wing veterans' organisation of the Weimar years.