

## **Deadly Bands: Introduction to the Political Problem of Violent Male Groups**

### **Applied History / Stanford Civics Initiative**

#### ***Course Catalogue Entry***

Thugs. Goons. Stormtroopers. Bandits. Gangsters. Rioters. King Lear's unruly knights. History is full of these men. But the same men are also police officers, militiamen, guild members, and soldiers. They can also do any of these things part-time. Why and how do men participate in violent groups? What happens when states cooperate with these groups, suppress them, or attempt to use them? And why are these groups so startlingly like one another, within many different polities and during many different times?

**This course will analyze political interactions in terms of contested negotiations around male interpersonal violence.** It will explore these negotiations through groups of what Charles Tilly called "violence specialists:" soldiers, the police, thugs, criminals, etc. In many times and places, these men were and are a "labor pool" of violence who offer security and muscle; and who also turn to criminal activity. The relationships of violence specialists to states can be cooperative or ambivalent as well as antagonistic—or networks of these men can make up the state itself.

The political challenge of violent men who are embedded in the rest of society—at once of it and outsiders to it—will always be with us. It is important for issues like post-Soviet states, the spike in violence during the Covid plague and its equally sudden decline, the militarization of police, and the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's Syria. An exploration of this challenge includes an excerpt from Stanford's own history.

**THIS SYLLABUS IS UNDER REVISION OFTEN. PLEASE CHECK IT FREQUENTLY.**

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating are against university policy, and they are immoral. (LLMs count as plagiarism, since it is not your work.) In a largely discussion-based class, they are also remarkably counterproductive.

#### **AT THE END OF THIS CLASS, YOU WILL**

1. Be familiar with debates about the role of male violence in wider political contexts, with the aid of classic thinkers in political science from Plato to Arendt.
2. Be able to read a text closely, for content and implication, and express your thoughts about this text. Be able to discuss these thoughts with a collegial group of other scholars to move toward the collective goal of greater understanding of the text, not to dominate others or "win a discussion."

#### **MOTIVATING IDEALS**

I believe that the practices of free inquiry are valuable **in themselves**, and therefore that we are learning how to **read** and how to **discuss**, including how to **disagree**. This does not mean that we will be competing to “get the right answer.” Often, the questions we explore have no right answer. The point is to grapple with important issues the United States faces, and consider how human beings in other times and places have faced them too.

One of the purposes of this class is to begin teaching you how to engage with texts and with one another on a sustained basis. Devices disrupt this focus. I would prefer to keep the digitization of the classroom limited, so we can practice reading and discussing at length and in depth. In a society where AI seems to mimic human thought, it is more and more essential for **our shared humanity** to cultivate habits of thought. That is what we will do in this class.

### **COURSE REQUIREMENTS**

1. Participation – 50%
2. Essay– 50%, broken into five assignments of ten percent each

#### **REQUIREMENT 1: PARTICIPATION**

I intend to conduct this class in the **seminar style**, in which I will ask an opening question and we will discuss it as a group. Although I will **facilitate** this discussion, we are together working toward an ideal where I do not **lead** it. Success in this course therefore depends on your regular attendance and active participation. You must read all the assigned reading material and be prepared to discuss it in depth among the class. Your grade will depend not only on the consistency of attendance, but also on how well you contribute positively to the overall class dynamic. I will keep attendance.

#### **REQUIREMENT 2: ESSAY**

This project is designed to improve your research skills and allow you to demonstrate your knowledge of the subject and the texts. Your task is to write a **maximum** 3000-word annotated essay using at least 8 sources, and no more than 10. **After you hand in each assignment, I will give you feedback. You will use this feedback to help you produce the next draft.** For this reason, the schedule will be very tight, and late work is discouraged.

#### **Assignments and Due Dates for Same**

**ASSIGNMENT ONE:** Submit your proposal along with a paragraph explaining why this topic is of interest to you and what you hope to learn by doing research on this topic. 10 points

**ASSIGNMENT TWO:** Outline and bibliography. Builds on Assignment 1. 10 points

**ASSIGNMENT THREE:** Rough draft. Builds on Assignment 2. 10 points

**ASSIGNMENT FOUR:** Rough draft. Builds on Assignment 3. 10 points.

**ASSIGNMENT FOUR:** Final draft. 10 points

## **THE CLASS**

### **Week 1**

#### **Introduction 1: Making the taken-for-granted visible: male groups as an object in the study of organized political violence**

- Hobbes, *Leviathan*: Chapters XIII, “Of the Naturall Condition of Mankind, as Concerning their Felicity, And Misery,” and XVII, “Of the causes, generation, and definition of a common-wealth”
- Raul Zepeda Gil, “Organised Violence, Inequality and Work: Violence Specialists as a Classed Occupation,” *Association for Critical Sociology* (2024): <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08969205241296501>

### **Week 2**

#### **Introduction 2: Why has violence dropped over time? Classical theory and new analysis**

- Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process, Vol 1: Changes in the Behavior of the Secular Upper Classes in the West* (1939): Chapter X, “On Changes in Aggressiveness”
- Douglass North, *Violence and Social Orders* (2001): Introduction and Chapter 1
- Rohit Acharya and Rhett Morris (2024): “Why did U.S. homicides spike in 2020 and then decline rapidly in 2023 and 2024?” <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/why-did-u-s-homicides-spike-in-2020-and-then-decline-rapidly-in-2023-and-2024/>

### **Week 3**

#### **Who are the agents of violence? Through what structures do they do it?**

- Barbara Diefendorf, *Beneath the Cross* (1991): Chapter 10, “The War in the Streets”
- Saumitra Jha and Steven Wilkinson, “Does Combat Experience Foster Organizational Skill? Evidence from Ethnic Cleansing during the Partition of South Asia,” *American Political Science Review* (2012): <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/american-political-science-review/article/does-combat-experience-foster-organizational-skill-evidence-from-ethnic-cleansing-during-the-partition-of-south-asia/3EAE23B76D48CAB3F9D6EAC5FE392913>

### **Week 4**

#### **(How) Do soldiers “fit” into the state?**

- Plato, *Republic*: Books 1-4

- Elad Alyagon, *Inked: Tattooed Soldiers and the Song Empire's Penal-Military Complex* (2023): Introduction, Chapter 2, "Dawn of the Age of Tattooing," and Chapter 6, "Resistance in the Military"

## Week 5

### Using, coopting, or stifling paramilitary groups

- John Mueller, "The Banality of 'Ethnic War,'" *International Security*, 25.1 (2000): <https://politicalscience.osu.edu/faculty/jmueller/is2000.pdf>
- Jesse Driscoll, *Warlords and Coalition Politics in Post-Soviet States* (2015): Introduction and Chapters 4 and 5

## Week 6

### A tight emotional bond, but not like that: "male bands" in theory and practice in early 20th century Germany

- Hans Blüher, *The Role of the Erotic in Masculine Society* (1917): "Military Comrades," translated by instructor
- Andrew Wackerfuss, *Stormtrooper Families: Homosexuality and Community in the Early Nazi Movement* (2015): Introduction and Chapter 8, "Long Knives"

## Week 7

### Gangs can be state-like, and states that are hollowed out by gangs: power wielded through male social networks

- Charles Tilly, "War Making and State Making as Organized Crime" (1982): <https://www.cambridge.org/core/books/abs/bringing-the-state-back-in/war-making-and-state-making-as-organized-crime/7A7B3B6577A060D76224F54A4DD0DA4C>
- Vadim Volkov, *Violent Entrepreneurs* (2002): Preface and Chapter 4, "Bandits and Capitalists"

## Week 8

### An instrument which feels itself embattled: one thousand years of the police

- Walter Benjamin, "Critique of Violence" (1921)
- William Bowsky, *A Medieval Italian Commune: Siena Under the Nine, 1287-1355* (1981): Chapter 4, "The Commune Uses Force"
- Didier Fassin, *Enforcing Order: An Ethnography of Urban Policing* (2013): Introduction and Chapter 2, "Ordinary"

## Week 9

### Public turmoil and public discussion

- Martin Luther King address at Stanford, "The Other America" (1967): <https://www.crmvet.org/docs/otheram.htm>

- Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (1978)

## **Week 10**

### **Live by the social network, die by the social network: The structures of Assadist resilience and collapse**

- Kheder Kaddour, “Strength in Weakness: The Syrian Army’s Accidental Resilience” (2016): <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2016/03/strength-in-weakness-the-syrian-armys-accidental-resilience?lang=en>
- Ben Hubbard, “Syria’s Army Was Hollowing Out Long Before Rebels’ Advance” (2024): <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/12/08/world/middleeast/syria-army-assad-fall.html>