

“... MORE POWERFUL THAN THE GODS’ VENGEANCE”: VIOLENCE AND RECON- CILIATION IN CLASSICAL ATHENS

By Peter Funke

Summary: Based on Hans-Joachim Gehrke’s foundational research on the anchoring of revenge in the socio-political environment of ancient Greek societies, the omnipresence of revenge and violence as defining constituents of everyday experience is first described. The terror regime of the ‘30 Tyrants’ in Athens (404/3 BC) is then examined from the perspective of guilt, retribution and revenge. Using the term ‘organised guilt’ introduced by Hannah Arendt, specific mechanisms for securing power are identified. Finally, the significance of the amnesty that paved the way for overcoming the tyranny of the ‘30’ is determined, which at the same time also provides a key to understanding political action in the social environment of Greek societies.

Anyone seeking an appropriate approach to the ‘classical period’ of Athens should start at its end and focus on a period that has long been described as a time of decline – as ‘late classical’ or even ‘post-classical’.¹ Here, one is confronted with upheavals and changes to what supposedly constituted the ‘classical’ period. However, it is only from this perspective that the characteristics of the classical period – not only *in politics* – can be properly understood. It is precisely these upheavals, in all their disturbing moments, that bring the essence of this epoch into sharper focus.

One of these disturbing moments is the constant presence of violence

- 1 In the wake of Claude Mossé’s significant and lasting impact on research with her theses on the decline of Athens in the fourth century BC (see Mossé 1962; Mossé 1973), Mogens H. Hansen contributed decisively to a fundamental change in perspective with his numerous studies on Athenian democracy (see Hansen 1999 and, most recently, 2018). A critical review of Mossé’s theses can be found in the forthcoming publication of contributions to the international conference organised by David M. Pritchard & Ian Worthington in July 2023, entitled *Fourth-Century Athens at War: After Claude Mossé*.

and vengeance. There has been no shortage of attempts – especially in recent years – to describe this phenomenon in its various manifestations. Recently, the topics of violence and vengeance have regained relevance, not least against the backdrop of contemporary experience, and by no means only regarding antiquity.² In this context, Hans-Joachim Gehrke's relevant studies are of particular importance. He does not content himself with merely describing the act of vengeance. In his comprehensive study of *stasis* – Greek civil war – in classical times and, above all, in a foundational study on 'Die Griechen und die Rache', he assigns vengeance and retribution a central place in the Greek mentality.³ Going beyond mere description, he determines the anchoring of this thinking and acting in what Edmund Husserl called 'Lebenswelt' ('life-world'),⁴ and he asks – here entirely in the tradition of Jakob Burckhardt⁵ – which 'Sitz im Leben' ('place in life') vengeance held among the ancient Greeks.⁶

The question of where vengeance and retribution have their 'seat in life' and how this is justified is answered by Gehrke with reference to a psychology of vengeance, which he uses to position vengeance within the inextricable web of loss through injustice and, above all, loss of honour. Defining vengeance as a decisive factor in Greek behavioural norms and firmly locating it in the socio-political environment of Greek societies offer a new approach to understanding them.

In the following, I would like to build on Gehrke's thoughts on violence and vengeance in ancient Greece with a view to a historical event in the history of Athens that was indelibly inscribed in the cultural memory of the Athenians (and not only the Athenians). I am referring to the rule of the so-called '30 Tyrants', who, immediately after the end of the Peloponnesian War established, with Spartan support, a reign of terror in Athens for a short period of just eight to nine months.⁷ Analysing the events surrounding the establishment and eventual overthrow of

2 A comprehensive overview of the more recent literature can be found in Gilhaus 2017; see also Riess & Fagan 2016; Foraboschi 2018; Breuer & Walter 2023; Ammann 2024.

3 Gehrke 1985; Gehrke 1987.

4 Husserl 1936.

5 See Burckhardt 1977: 319–95.

6 Gehrke 1987: 138; cf. also the addendum in Gehrke 2019: 398–99; McHardy 2008.

7 See Lehmann 1972; Azoulay & Ismard 2025 (with further literature).

this regime of terror from the perspective of guilt, vengeance and retribution seems to be a suitable way of clarifying the specific mechanisms of securing power. I will present my thoughts in three steps, first describing the omnipresence of violence and vengeance as defining constituents of everyday experience, and then discussing the case of the rule of the ‘30 Tyrants’. In a third step, I will determine, in the context of the preceding considerations, the significance of the Amnesty, which paved the way for the final overthrow of the tyranny of the ‘Thirty’ and its consequences, but which, beyond this particular event, also provides a key to understanding the specific framework conditions of political action in the social environment of Greek societies.

First, let us consider the almost normative impact of the concept of vengeance. Anyone seeking to trace the concept of vengeance in Greek culture will first be directed to dramatic literature, specifically tragic poetry. In no other form of literature or drama is the interplay of violence, vengeance and retribution addressed and portrayed as thoroughly as in the Attic tragedies of the fifth century. Accordingly, there is no shortage of relevant detailed studies, to which I do not wish to add another here. It may suffice to point out a common feature of many of these studies: the difficulty of dealing with the inevitability of the act – usually murder – that follows from the ideal of vengeance and which, in its seemingly cruel consequence, disturbs us again and again. So disturbing was this juxtaposition in fact, that, for example, the subject matter of Euripides’ *Medea* underwent a change in later versions of European literature up to the present day, in that attempts were always made to “explain Medea’s act, the killing of her own children, in some way – usually as a crime of passion – to make it acceptable, thus removing the ultimate horror of the act or at least marginalising the perpetrator as demonic and superhuman.”⁸ Euripides takes a completely different view. “Here, the act is nothing more than a bare act of vengeance,” to which what Wolf Hartmut Friedrich summarises in one sentence applies: Medea “does not say anything in Euripides that would have seemed strange in the 5th century, i.e. before Socrates and Plato.”⁹

8 Gehrke 1987: 128 with reference to Friedrich 1967 and Dihle 1976; cf. also Prata & Verano 2024.

9 Friedrich 1967: 52; cf. also Gehrke 1987: 128; Descharmes 2013.

However, the act of vengeance also found its limits on stage. What determined the thoughts and actions was verbalised, but not everything was depicted. Horace therefore recommends:

Either an event is acted on the stage, or the action is narrated. Less vividly is the mind stirred by what finds entrance through the ears than by what is brought before the trusty eyes, and what the spectator can see for himself. Yet you will not bring upon the stage what should be performed behind the scenes, and you will keep much from our eyes, which an actor's ready tongue will narrate anon in our presence; so that Medea is not to butcher her boys before the people, nor impious Atreus cook human flesh upon the stage, nor Procne be turned into a bird, Cadmus into a snake. Whatever you thus show me, I discredit and abhor.¹⁰

What applied to the stage did not apply in the same way to the visual arts' engagement with myth. I would like to illustrate this with a few brief, sketchy considerations, especially since research by Luca Giuliani, Anja Klöckner, Ralf von den Hoff and Susanne Muth has opened up new perspectives for my question.¹¹

When Luca Giuliani gave a lecture at the Berlin Wissenschaftskolleg on the 'Problem des Mitleids bei antiken Darstellungen von Gewalt', he wisely added a question mark to the title 'Marsyas als Märtyrer?'¹² The starting point for Giuliani's remarks was the story of the satyr Marsyas, who dared to challenge Apollo to a musical contest on his flute, on the condition that the winner could do with the loser as he pleased. As is well known, Apollo won with his kithara and had Marsyas hung from a tree and flayed alive. Giuliani focused his considerations on a Hellenistic group of statues from the late third or early second century BC, which depicts Marsyas tied to a tree in an extremely realistic manner, looking in panic at his tormentor kneeling before him, who seems to have just finished sharpening his knife to skin Marsyas.¹³

10 Hor. *Ars P.* 179–88 (translated by H.B. Fairclough).

11 See Giuliani 2004; Klöckner 2005; von den Hoff 2005; Muth 2008.

12 Giuliani 2005; Giuliani 2006.

13 See the pictures in Giuliani 2005.

Since this group of statues was probably originally a votive offering to Apollo, Giuliani ruled out any sympathetic bias towards the victim of the god’s wrath. The nature of a votive offering to Apollo precludes such an interpretation, instead establishing “partisanship for the god and against Marsyas”.¹⁴ And indeed, everything seems to indicate that the sight of such a precise depiction of a violent scene, the gruesome outcome of which was well known to every viewer, was nothing more than an “occasion for aesthetic pleasure”, as Giuliani calls it.¹⁵ This is a finding that seems very strange at first, but it is entirely justified in Greek thinking, in which there was no place for pity for Marsyas. In this context, Giuliani rightly referred to Aristotelian rhetoric, in which pity – *eleos* – could be shown only to those threatened by evil without deserving it.¹⁶ Marsyas, however, deserved it: by arrogantly challenging the god, he had violated his honour. And according to the Greeks, this honour (and by no means only that of the gods) could, indeed had to, be restored through retribution. What happened to Marsyas was therefore nothing more than an act of vengeance, that corresponded to the expected and logical restoration of violated honour.

Thus, violence gains its firm place in a structure of action that is determined by a dialectic between vengeance and retribution. This dialectic was omnipresent in the lives of the Greeks and also found meaningful and visible expression in art. Nowhere is this clearer than in the mythical traditions. To illustrate this, I will add two further examples to the story of Marsyas from an infinite wealth of material. First, Niobe, the daughter of King Tantalus, who was also cruelly punished by the gods for his arrogance, had mocked the goddess Leto for having only two children, whereas Niobe had many. Apollo and Artemis avenged their mother's wounded honour by killing all of Niobe's children. Niobe – described by Jakob Burckhardt as the *mater dolorosa* of myth¹⁷ – froze in pain and turned to stone and was carried away as a rock to her Lydian homeland.

14 Giuliani 2005: 218: “Parteinahme für den Gott und gegen Marsyas.”

15 Giuliani 2005: 225: “ein Anlass zu ästhetischem Vergnügen.”

16 Arist. *Rh.* 2.8. (1385b11-1386b7); see also Giuliani 2004; Hall Sternberg 2005; Giuliani 2006.

17 Burckhardt 1977: 325.

Once again, it is the interplay of wounded honour, vengeance and retribution that erupts in a violent manner here. This emotionally charged yet merciless pathos, with which vengeance is carried out, is confusing and finds its iconographic expression in countless ancient vase paintings that possess a coolness which repels our own perception of such violence.

A third and final case, impressively analysed by Anja Klöckner,¹⁸ is the story of Procne, daughter of the Athenian king Pandion, who was married to the Thracian king Tereus. After Tereus raped and mutilated her sister Philomela, Procne killed her own son Itys and served him to her husband Tereus at dinner. After the meal, when the sisters presented Tereus with Itys' head, he discovered the horrific deed and sought vengeance. At this point, Zeus interrupted the vicious circle of violence and retribution by turning them all into birds – Tereus into a hoopoe, Philomela into a swallow and Procne into a nightingale, which now mourns her dead son Itys for all eternity.

It may surprise us – and yet it is significant – that at the time of the Peloponnesian War, the Athenians erected a group of statues of Procne and her son in a prominent place on the Acropolis, in the immediate vicinity of the Parthenon, and that at the same time several tragedies dealt with the fate of Procne. Anja Klöckner was right to see Procne in a role conflict, which she resolved in accordance with the prevailing norms by choosing her family of origin, since her own parents and sister were irreplaceable, whereas her husband and child were fundamentally replaceable. This is an attitude that is often found in Greek thinking and which Sophocles, for example, also attributes to Antigone when he has her justify her actions – burying her own brother despite the express prohibition of the King of Thebes – with the words:

... for never, had children of whom I was the mother or had my husband perished and been mouldering there, would I have taken on myself this task, in defiance of the citizens. In virtue of what law do I say this? If my husband had died, I could have had another, and a child by

18 Klöckner 2005; cf. also Manioti 2018; Mancuso 2022.

another man, if I had lost the first, but with my mother and my father in Hades below, I could never have another brother.¹⁹

Procne therefore behaved entirely as expected. This was also the view of Pausanias, who had seen the statue group of Procne and Itys on the Acropolis in the second century AD, when he wrote:

They say that Tereus, though wedded to Procne, dishonoured Philomela, thereby transgressing Greek custom, and further, having mangled the body of the damsel, constrained the women to avenge her.²⁰

This compulsion to seek vengeance, resulting from an all-encompassing concept of honour, made violence omnipresent in Greek society and, under certain conditions, even necessary and justified. Therefore, the *polis* could seek to secure the community’s existence only by containing violence and regulating vengeance, not by prohibiting it. And that was a laborious undertaking, especially since the gods could not and probably did not want to turn all humans into birds – after all, they themselves were subject to the same maxims of action. The effort to subject violence to a principle of order is already reflected in the mythology and poetry of the Archaic period. In his *Works & Days*, Hesiod invokes Dike, the personification of justice, in the famous parable of the hawk and the nightingale, to set limits on *bia*, that is unregulated and unbridled violence.²¹ And the early Draconian and Solonian legislation in Athens aimed to limit, and ideally prevent, blood feuds, which posed an existential threat to the *polis* community. The subsequent development of Greek legal thinking saw the “domestication of vengeance”²² through law, but not its replacement. At best, the law functioned as a regulatory mechanism, merely “chaining down vengeance”.²³

These few examples from Greek imagery and imagination should have made it sufficiently clear to what extent categories such as honour,

19 Soph. *Ant.* 908-15 (translated by H. Lloyd-Jones).

20 Paus. 1.5.4 (translated by W.H.S. Jones).

21 Hes. *Op.* 202-218.

22 Gehrke 1987: 130.

23 Gehrke 1987: 141: “die Rache an die Kette legen.”

vengeance and retribution shaped perceptions and determined actions. This applied equally to the private and public spheres, with the result that the Greek world of the Classical period was in a virtually permanent state of war. Echoes of this situation can still be found in the apologetic work *Katà Kélsou* (*Contra Celsum*) by the Church Father Origen, written at the turn of the third century AD. In it, he reflects on the possibilities of spreading Christian doctrine throughout the world, categorically ruling it out in times “when a war was necessary, such as that between the Peloponnesians and the Athenians, and similarly in the case of the other nations which fought one another. Accordingly, how could this teaching, which preaches peace and does not even allow men to take vengeance on their enemies, have had any success?”²⁴

What Origen had in mind here were the events of the Peloponnesian War, in which violence fuelled by mutual acts of vengeance unfolded in all its brutality and exerted its destructive force both in the conflict between states and in countless civil wars. Thucydides impressively described the extent to which the war affected the innermost conditions of the Greek *poleis* in his account of the bloody civil war conflicts in Kerkyra during the first years of the war. With sharp analytical insight and skilful literary technique, Thucydides sketches a concise but apt pathology of war and the brutalisation of political customs that it causes:

And so the cities began to be disturbed by revolutions, and those that fell into this state later, on hearing of what had been done before, carried to still more extravagant lengths the invention of new devices ... by ... the monstrosity of their vengeance. ... To get vengeance on someone was more valued than never having suffered injury oneself. ... The cause of all these evils was the desire to rule which greed and ambition inspire, and also, springing from them, that ardour which belongs to men who once have become engaged in factious rivalry. For those who emerged as party leaders in the several cities, by assuming on either side a fair-sounding name, the one using as its catchword ‘political equality for the masses under the law’, the other ‘temperate aristocracy’, while they pretended to be devoted to the common weal, in reality made it their prize; striving in every way to get

24 Origen. *C. Cels.* 2.30.

the better of each other, they dared the most awful deeds and sought vengeance still more awful, not pursuing these within the bounds of justice and the public good, but limiting them, both parties alike, only by the moment’s caprice.²⁵

As is well known, Athens was not spared these internal political upheavals either. The brutality of the war also turned inwards here. And with that, I would like to move on to the second aspect of my remarks, the rule of the so-called ‘30 Tyrants’ in Athens in 404/3 BC, immediately after the Peloponnesian War ended.

Following the swift fading of the high hopes that had been pinned on the conclusion of the so-called ‘Peace of Nicias’ in 421 BC, the anti-democratic forces in Athens seized their opportunity to incite a revolution. A more detailed account of the events²⁶ is not necessary here, as I am concerned only with a specific aspect of the domestic political upheavals in Athens. The devastating catastrophe in Sicily, the continued presence of Spartan troops in Attica and severe military setbacks in the Aegean had put Athens in a precarious situation in 412/11 BC. This also led to serious domestic political tensions. The anti-democratic forces in Athens, often organised in small exclusive clubs known as *hetaireiai*, finally saw a chance to pursue their long-cherished plans for a coup. Through murder and manslaughter, they created an atmosphere of fear and terror in the city paving the way for the overthrow of democracy. Thucydides’ account vividly depicts the systematic terror employed:

Now this was only a specious pretext intended for the masses, for the very same men who were endeavouring to change the government were going to have control of the state. The people, however, and the council chosen by the bean were none the less still convened; but they discussed nothing that was not approved by the conspirators; nay, not only were the speakers from this party, but what should be said had been previously considered by them. And none of the others spoke against them any longer, out of fear and because it was clear that the

25 Thuc. 3.82.3-8 (translated by C. Forster).

26 On this, see Lehmann 1972; Funke 1980; Krentz 1982; Lehmann 1997: 25-61; Azoulay & Ismard 2025 (with further literature).

conspiracy was widespread; and if anyone did oppose it, he was immediately and conveniently killed. And no search was made for those who did the deed, nor, if they were suspected, was any legal prosecution held; on the contrary, the populace kept quiet and were in such consternation that he who did not suffer any violence, even though he never said a word, counted that a gain. Imagining the conspiracy to be much more widespread than it actually was, they were cowed in mind, and owing to the size of the city and their lack of knowledge of one another they were unable to find out the facts. For the same reason it was also impossible for any man that was offended to pour out his grievances to another and thus plot to avenge himself, for he would discover any person to whom he might speak to be either a stranger or, if an acquaintance, faithless. For all the members of the popular party approached each other with suspicion, as though everyone had a hand in what was going on. And, indeed, there were among them men whom one would never have expected to change over and favour an oligarchy; and it was these who caused the greatest distrust among the masses and rendered the most valuable service toward the few in securing their safety by confirming in the populace this distrust of their own people.²⁷

When Thucydides expressly emphasises that it was impossible to take vengeance for the injustice suffered, it becomes clear that a whole new dimension of violence was expressed here. This overrode the usual interplay of vengeance and retribution, bringing with it a completely different experience of violence for the Athenians. This actually had all the elements associated with the concept of terror, primarily linked to the dark side of the dawn of modernity at the end of the 18th century. The events in Athens at that time certainly showed signs of ‘terreur’ as a violent means of enforcing ideological objectives, leaving a bloody trail through history from the French Revolution to the present day.

The result was fatal, albeit short-lived: the Athenian popular assembly, frightened and intimidated by the oligarchically-minded *hetaireiai*, agreed to the introduction of a new constitution in June 411 BC. All democratic offices and institutions were dissolved. Only 5,000 citizens were

27 Thuc. 8.66 (translated by Ch. Forster).

permitted to retain their political rights, and the affairs of government were transferred to a council of 400 members. However, the body of 5,000 full citizens was never constituted. The Council of 400, filled with the coup leaders’ sympathisers, held all decision-making power.²⁸

Although the oligarchic experiment failed after a short time due to the determined resistance of the democratic Government-in-Exile formed in Samos, the 411 BC coup was by no means inconsequential; its failure did not mean an end to violence in Athens. On the contrary, the collapse of the oligarchic regime once again set in motion the spiral of violence and counter-violence marked by thoughts of vengeance, which, as Thucydides noted, had come to a standstill due to the oligarchic terror. The democrats, having regained power, did their part to deprive their oligarchic opponents of any opportunity to resume their activities. However, they did not entirely succeed in doing so in the following years, especially since the measures taken against the oligarchic partisans (trials, executions and exile) merely kept their hatred of the democratic system alive and evoked a desire for vengeance.

The time for vengeance came when Athens’ defeat in the Peloponnesian War was finally sealed. Already in the desperate final phase of the war, the oligarchic *hetaireiai* were revived and began to spread terror and panic through opaque and uncontrollable machinations. Once again, terror became a means of vengeance that was impossible to elude. In addition, shortly afterwards, in the wake of the Spartans, the oligarchically-minded emigrants also returned to Athens, having left the city – as far as they could – after their defeat in 410 BC. The Spartans relied entirely on these forces and established a junta of thirty pro-Spartan politicians who were entrusted with all governmental power. Many of these ‘Thirty’ had already distinguished themselves as oligarchic activists in 411 BC. The ‘Thirty’ occupied the council and magistracies with their supporters and restricted Athenian citizenship to 3,000 people who were exclusively their supporters and were unconditionally sworn in to the new regime.

With the backing of a Spartan occupation force, the ‘Thirty’ unleashed a reign of terror that claimed the lives of approximately 2,500 people – including more than 1,500 Athenian citizens – in less than a year. To ap-

28 Cf. the literature cited in note 24.

preciate the scale of this, it is instructive to note that this figure is numerically comparable to the approximately 2,600 people who ended up on the scaffold during the ‘terreur’ phase of 1793/4 in Paris. Contemporaries of the French Revolution already shared this view. The economist Dupont de Nemours, a former moderate deputy who had only escaped the guillotine thanks to the fall of Robespierre, drew parallels between the ‘terreur’ and the rule of the ‘Thirty’ in Athens by adapting the Attic orator Lysias’ speech *Against Eratosthenes* (Lys. 12) on the acts of terror committed by the ‘Thirty’ to the welfare and security committees, replacing the names of the Athenian perpetrators with those of the corresponding members of these committees.²⁹

Critias, one of the ‘Thirty’, is said to have commented on the large number of victims with the words:

Gentlemen of the Senate, if anyone among you thinks that more people than is fitting are being put to death, let him reflect that where governments are changed these things always take place. ... It is true, of course, that all sorts of changes in government are attended by loss of life [...].³⁰

Contemporary sources reveal the progressive dynamics of systematic violence and terror, which Plutarch would later describe as follows:

The first man put to death by the Thirty was a certain informer (sycophant) who was said to deserve it, and so was the second and the third; but after that they went on, step by step, until they were laying hands on honest men and eventually did not spare even the best of the citizens.³¹

Arrests, executions and confiscations were the order of the day and were carried out with no regard for any semblance of right. However, the victims were by no means only opponents of the regime. To flush more

29 Nippel 2008: 189.

30 Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.24.32 (translated by C.L. Brownson).

31 Plut. *Mor.* 959D (translated by H. Cherniss & W. Helmbold); see also Plut. *Mor.* 998B; [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 35.

money into their coffers, the ‘Thirty’ also seized and killed wealthy citizens and metics, even though they had done nothing wrong. These violent excesses reached a cruel climax with the mass murder of the Athenian civic population in Eleusis and Salamis, in which 300 people were killed solely because the ‘Thirty’ had built a refuge in these places as a precautionary measure and saw the local population as a threat to their own safety.³²

The arbitrariness and brutality of the action may well have been fuelled by a desire for vengeance for the overthrow of the oligarchic regime in 410 BC, but that alone cannot adequately explain the events of 404/3 BC. By this point, it was no longer solely about seeking retribution and satisfying feelings of vengeance, but about securing their own position of power at any cost. However, in a society dominated by thoughts of vengeance, the ‘Thirty’ had to anticipate the vengeance of their opponents. The terror they exercised inevitably provoked vengeance, so they did everything in their power to prevent the cycle of vengeance and retaliation from starting again. Their totalitarian regime was intended to break any resistance from the outset. In his indictment of Eratosthenes, a member of the ‘Thirty’, Lysias later summed it up as follows:

Remember how they snatched some from the market, others from the sanctuaries, and killed them violently; how they tore others away from their children, their parents, and their wives, forced them to commit suicide, and did not allow them a proper burial. For these people believed that their rule was more powerful than the gods' vengeance.³³

The ‘Thirty’s’ hybrid claim to power is understood here in terms of vengeance and is perceived as an excessive violation of all behavioural norms. At least in terms of its claim, it seeks to evade any resistance, even that of the gods. However, this interpretation only illuminates one aspect of the tyranny of the ‘Thirty’. Contemporary source material also reveals another side to their rule that is closely linked to the aforementioned point, yet which nevertheless requires separate consideration.

32 Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.8-9; Lys. 12.52; 13.44.

33 Lys. 12.9 (translation by author).

Ancient accounts of the atrocities repeatedly emphasise that the ‘Thirty’ junta systematically sought to force Athenian citizens who appeared to be sympathetic to the oligarchic government into showing loyalty to the regime by actively participating in violent acts. The ‘Thirty’ not only decided that each of them should seize and execute a wealthy metic and confiscate his property to fill the state coffers and pay the Spartan occupation troops,³⁴ but also demanded the same of many citizens, including Socrates. In Plato's *Apologia*, Socrates recounts how he and four other citizens were summoned to the office of the ‘Thirty’, where they were ordered to bring Leon, a citizen of Salamis, to be executed. Socrates then continues:

They ordered many others to do things of this sort, wishing that as many as possible would be implicated in the responsibility. Then, however, I showed again, not in speech but in deed, that I do not care about death in any way at all – if it is not too crude to say so – but that my only care is to commit no unjust or impious deed. That rule, as strong as it was, did not shock me into doing anything unjust. When we came out of the Tholos, the other four went to Salamis and arrested Leon, but I departed and went home. And perhaps I would have died because of this, if that rule had not been quickly dissolved.³⁵

And when the ‘Thirty’ demanded that the citizens who remained in the city condemn their completely innocent fellow citizens from Eleusis to death, the ‘Thirty’ did so on the following grounds:

We, gentlemen, [...] are establishing this government no less for you than for ourselves. Therefore, even as you will share in honours, so also you must share in the dangers. Therefore you must vote condemnation of the Eleusinians who have been seized, that you may have the same hopes and fears as we.³⁶

34 Xen. *Hell.* 2.3.21.

35 Plat. *Apol.* 32c-d (translated by T.G. West).

36 Xen. *Hell.* 2.4.9 (translated by C.L. Brownson).

The ‘Thirty’ could not have articulated the objectives of their violent politics more clearly. The rituals and initiation rites developed by the *hetaireiai* and political clubs to strengthen their internal cohesion provided a model for what was practised here in politics. One need only recall Alcibiades, who is said to have tested the reliability of his *hetaireia* members by attempting to make them accomplices and participants in a murder, albeit a fictitious one.³⁷ Among the ‘Thirty’, such tests became deadly serious. The more partisans they could involve in their murderous craft and thus entangle in guilt, the stronger the cohesion within the oligarchically-minded citizenry would become – even if it was primarily based on fear and terror. Thus, terror becomes a means of securing power.

In such contexts, the German term ‘Kollektivschuld’ (‘collective guilt’) is often used to describe the effects of this practice of rule.³⁸ The term is certainly apt when one considers the intentions of those in power and the outcome. However, it falls short when it comes to understanding and describing the mechanisms and functioning of this system of rule. Another term – developed by Hannah Arendt in a short essay, written in November 1944 and first published in English translation in the January 1945 issue of the magazine *Jewish Frontier* – is more suitable for this purpose.³⁹ In it, Arendt impressively and concisely analyses the methods used by National Socialist rulers to make as broad a section of the German population as possible participants in the murderous regime. If they could not be integrated into the “people’s community of crime”, the Na-

37 Polyaeus, *Strat.* 1.49.1.

38 On the origin of the term ‘Kollektivschuld’ see Frei 1997.

39 Arendt 1945a. In September of the same year, an abridged version of the German-language manuscript appeared in the Argentine magazine *La Orca Alemania* (Arendt 1945b), and in April 1946, the complete original manuscript was published for the first time in Germany in the fourth issue of the first volume of the magazine *Die Wandlung*; reprints appeared in 1948, 1978 and 2019 (Arendt 1946). This article is based on the 2025 edition of Arendt. For the historical context, see Meyer 2025: 11–31; Sznajder 2025.

tional Socialist rulers at least wanted to push them into the role of accomplices and confidants, thus striving for “the total complicity of the German people”.⁴⁰

The first publication of her article, which appeared in English under the title ‘Organized Guilt and Universal Responsibility’, also contains the term ‘collective guilt’.⁴¹ In the original German manuscript, however, Hannah Arendt uses the term ‘Gesamtschuld’ instead of ‘Kollektivschuld’.⁴² But she centres her considerations on another term she coined: ‘organised guilt’, in order to outline more sharply the emergence of the collective that is bound up in guilt. My aim here is not to reopen the debate on ‘Kollektivschuld’, but to assess whether ‘organised guilt’ can serve as an effective historical interpretative model to explain, or at least succinctly describe, the interplay between the reign of terror and the stabilisation of power. Through the concept of ‘organised guilt’, Hannah Arendt sought to reveal the interplay between securing the position of those in power and entangling as many people as possible in common perpetration and complicity. This is precisely the kind of interplay that the ‘Thirty’ also pursued to establish a stronger foundation for their rule, and that process can be adequately understood from the perspective of organising guilt.

Such a mechanism for stabilising power, which functioned according to the principle of ‘organised guilt’ and which could have been illustrated by many other examples, not only from ancient history, was bound to be particularly successful in a society such as that of ancient Athens. Even though the ‘Thirty’ believed their rule to be “more powerful than the gods’ vengeance”,⁴³ all those who had joined the regime remained fearful of the vengeance of the others in the event of failure. While this undoubtedly strengthened cohesion among the ranks of the ‘Thirty’s’ supporters,

40 Arendt 2025: 364: “Die Berichte über diese Verbrechen ... werden heute [1944] von den Nazis völlig offen als Liquidierungsmaßnahmen zugestanden, um diejenigen ‘Volksgenossen’, welche man ... in die ‘Volksgemeinschaft’ des Verbrechens (hat) aufnehmen können, wenigstens in die Rolle der Mitwisser und Komplizen zu drängen. Die totale Mobilmachung hat in der totalen Komplizität des deutschen Volkes geendet.”

41 Arendt 1945b: capt. II.

42 Arendt 2025: 367.

43 Lys. 12.96.

it also strengthened the front of their opponents. The faster the spiral of violence and terror spun, the deeper the rift within Athenian society became, marked by hatred and a thirst for revenge.

This rift was correspondingly difficult to overcome when a democratic resistance movement formed in exile brought about the downfall of the ‘Thirty’ (and a short-lived successor regime) in bitter fighting after only eight months, restoring the democratic constitutional order. The signals were set to effect reconciliation, not least due to pressure from Sparta, and a general amnesty for all civil war crimes, from which only the inner core of the terrorist regime was excluded, served as the basis for a settlement between the two sides. All citizens swore an oath to *ou mnesikakein*, i.e. never again to remember past injustices or seek vengeance for them – with the exception of the crimes committed by members of the 30 and the 10 in Peiraieus.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, mistrust in the permanence of this Amnesty was so great that both sides of the civil war agreed to divide the city and establish a separate oligarchic state within the territory of Athens at Eleusis. This mini-state was intended to offer refuge to those who did not trust the agreed reconciliation. The coexistence of the two Attic states was contractually regulated down to the detail of a kind of *laissez-passer* arrangement.⁴⁵

This mistrust was not entirely unjustified. Despite the agreed Amnesty, there had been numerous attempts to undermine it, to exact retribution and to take vengeance. This was to be expected, as a general amnesty contradicted common perceptions and expectations, representing an unacceptable imposition. After all, it meant unconditionally renouncing vengeance, which the Greeks believed to be nothing less than a ‘duty’.⁴⁶ One example of this is the case of the Athenian Dionysodoros, who had been sentenced to death by the ‘Thirty’, about whom Lysias reports:

44 See Funke 1980: 1-26; Loening 1987; Flaig 1991; Ober 2005; Loraux 2006; Meier 1997; Meier 2010: 15-40; Carawan 2015; Harter-Uibopuu & Mitthof 2013; Joyce 2022; Azoulay & Ismard 2025: 96-137.

45 See Lehmann 1972.

46 Gehrke 1987: 123.

Now, when the sentence of death, gentlemen, had been passed on them, and they had to die, each of them sent for his sister, or his mother, or his wife, or any female relative that he had, to see them in prison, so that they might take their last farewell from their people before they ended their days. In particular, Dionysodoros sent for my sister – she was his wife – to see him in prison. ... In the presence of my sister, Dionysodoros, after disposing of his personal property as he thought fit, referred to this man Agoratus as responsible for his death, and charged me and Dionysios his brother here, and all his friends to execute his vengeance upon Agoratus; and he charged his wife, believing her to be with child by him, that if she should bear a son she should tell the child that Agoratos had taken his father's life and should bid him execute his father's vengeance on the man for this murder. To show the truth of what I state, I will produce witnesses to these facts.⁴⁷

The case of Dionysodoros shows how deeply rooted the Athenians' desire for vengeance was, and how much resistance the amnesty agreements had to overcome. It was only thanks to the farsighted policies of leading democrats, who insisted on strict and unconditional compliance with the amnesty that the course of events in Athens changed, leading to the dissolution of the Eleusinian separate state and the political reunification of Attica within two years.

The uncompromising and consistent enforcement of the amnesty had not failed to have an effect, so that Isocrates was able to state in the same year that the amnesty had made it possible to live together in harmony again and that the Athenians were therefore considered the happiest and wisest of all Greeks.⁴⁸ And in the same year, Andokides emphasised that all of Greece admired the Athenians for preserving the *polis* rather than seeking vengeance.⁴⁹ Lysias also emphasises that the victors were not interested in vengeance against their enemies, but in saving the *polis*.⁵⁰

47 Lys. 13.39-42.

48 Isoc. 18.45-46.

49 Andoc. 1.140.

50 Lys. 2.64.

Ultimately, it was not the rule of the ‘Thirty’ that proved “more powerful than the gods’ vengeance”, but the will for concord (*homónoia*) in the *polis*. The fact that this was also linked to the common will to restore Athens’ lost foreign policy power is another matter. Nevertheless, the sustainability and permanence of the amnesty demonstrate that the power-political aspects were a necessary but not sufficient condition for the extraordinary act of the amnesty.

Vengeance is “structurally rooted in an environment of irreconcilability.”⁵¹ This must be kept in mind if one wants to understand the political actions of the Greeks, which often seem so alien to us, especially since irreconcilability encompasses much more than mere political opposition. If one wanted to overcome the irreconcilability, the only way was the *ou mnesikakein*, that is, to erase what had happened from memory in order to stop the cycle of vengeance. However, in practice the amnesty actually involved precisely the opposite of what it claimed to involve: namely an act of forgetting. The constant recourse to the amnesty in the day-to-day dealings of Athenian politics, which was apparently necessary, shows that the events were deeply imprinted in people’s memories and could not be forgotten. Paradoxically, the amnesty thus became a way of coping with memory. The past should never be amnestied, but always remembered. This is because “there is a connection between remembering and not only expectations of justice and demands for vengeance, but also the guarantee of peace, including inner peace, integration and social identity”.⁵²

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51 Gehrke 1987: 134: “... strukturell in einem Milieu der Unversöhnlichkeit angesiedelt.”

52 Meier 1997: 91: “Denn es gibt eben eine Beziehung des Erinnerns nicht nur zu Gerechtigkeitserwartungen und Racheforderungen, sondern auch zur Gewährleistung von Frieden, auch innerem Frieden, und Integration sowie zur gesellschaftlichen Identität.”

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