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‘WE DO BAD THINGS TO BAD PEOPLE’: KRAV MAGA’S GERMAN CAREER IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL SYSTEMS THEORY

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ABSTRACT

Despite its worldwide popularity, Israel-originated Krav Maga is still remarkably unexplored. With regards to Krav Maga’s global spread, this article focuses on the ‘social career’ of Krav Maga in Germany and enquires into the conditions for its success. Beginning in the 2000s, Krav Maga has rapidly resonated throughout Germany, nowadays showing a high degree of social connectivity and differentiation. Analysed through the lenses of social systems theory, Krav Maga’s increasing popularity in Germany can to a significant degree be ascribed to communication – implemented in particular by highlighting relevant differences from other practices and systems of self-defence, and by its new correspondences with contemporary social and individual needs and expectations. As our analysis shows, Krav Maga, as an effective solution to the pressing problem of interpersonal violence, provides an answer to a problem that is at least partly contributed to by the system itself. Following initial analyses of the spread of Wing Chun in Germany, this case study makes a further contribution to an understanding of the socio-cultural evolution of self-defence systems in Germany.

INTRODUCTION

Despite its worldwide popularity, the Israel-originated self-defence system Krav Maga is still remarkably unexplored. However, in recent years, Krav Maga has gained scientific attention from different disciplinary perspectives. For instance, practice-oriented studies have focused on general aspects of motor control on a neurophysiological level [Mor 2021] or examined medical and pedagogical issues of injury and injury prevention in civilian [Staller et al. 2017] and military [Farkash et al. 2017] Krav Maga training.

Cultural and political studies have investigated the actual role of Krav Maga in a globalized world, focusing on its particular reference to violence. In his recent study, Molle [Molle 2022] identified Krav Maga as a social ‘vaccine’ against violence within violent modern societies, and thus touches on the paradox of the self-application of violence to violence, which can only be resolved in perspective. For Krav Maga, it takes the use of a certain lens to provide a sense of solidarity on a group or nation’s level based on violence. Also referring to violence, the ethnographic study of Cohen [Cohen 2010] sheds light on the transgressive power of Israeli Krav Maga training. In the so called ‘tour and train’ programme in Israel, especially designed for foreign tourists, the abstract political discourse on the global war on terror manifests itself on an individual, concretely physical level through exercises in self-defence. In the realm of somatic reasoning, tourists participating in the program become practically and ideologically part of the global ‘war on terror’.

Finally, recent research on the history of Krav Maga has provided further valuable insights on the origin, invention, and global spread of the system. Originated in Israel and by no means the product of a sole inventor [Mor 2018; Schaflechner 2021], Krav Maga ‘as a globally recognizable signifier for self-defence’ [Schaflechner 2021: 110] has spread around the world, and is now being ‘practiced in over 120 countries’ [Mor 2018].

This article further elaborates on Krav Maga’s global resonance using a single case study. The focus settles on the key question of how the quite remarkable spread of Krav Maga in Germany can be explained. Beginning in the 2000s, Krav Maga has spread rapidly throughout Germany, nowadays showing a high degree of social connectivity and differentiation. Analysed through the lens of social systems theory, Krav Maga’s German career appears to be at least partly an effect of generalized streams of communication – in particular realized by highlighting relevant differences to existing practices and systems of self-defence, and by corresponding to contemporary social and individual needs and expectations.

Social systems theory is used here as a method to describe Krav Maga as a social system *based on and reproduced through communication*. According to systems theory, Krav Maga has no ontological basis beyond communication. Instead, it is based on iterative processes of communication of the same type, thereby establishing and perpetuating the system’s state of existence.

Within its conceptual architecture, social systems theory [Luhmann 2008] offers the potential for a systematically guided analysis of Krav Maga’s national career. From this perspective, Krav Maga’s German success can be scrutinized as an effect of communication, making use of significant differences that articulate Krav Maga’s specificity and distinguish it from other martial arts, thereby presenting the system as a rather unique solution to the contemporary forms of the problem of interpersonal violence. Following our initial systems theory analyses of the national spread of Wing Chun [Koerner et al. 2019], this case study makes a further contribution to a broader understanding of the sociocultural evolution of self-defence systems in Germany.

GERMAN DATA

In Germany, Krav Maga has gained a remarkable amount of public attention within the last 20 years [Or and Yanilov 2008; Madsen 2014; Draheim 2016; Wahle 2016; Draheim 2018]. According to interview data from one of the early pioneers of Krav Maga in Germany,¹ the very beginning of Krav Maga’s public career in Germany started in the early 2000s:

Because the police and military units have always exchanged and communicated with each other [...], there were certainly already the first pioneers in the professional area, in the security sector, who trained somewhere or did something. But it remained limited to professional groups. And what there was, of course, and there is still today, are Israelis who have left their military units and see a future profession in it, to pass on their knowledge [...] That [situation] already existed in 2000, 2002. [...] And in 2002 there were already two people before me and [my colleagues], who had actually been in Israel two years before [...] In that sense they are for me the very first ones, actually. (Pioneer 1 2018)

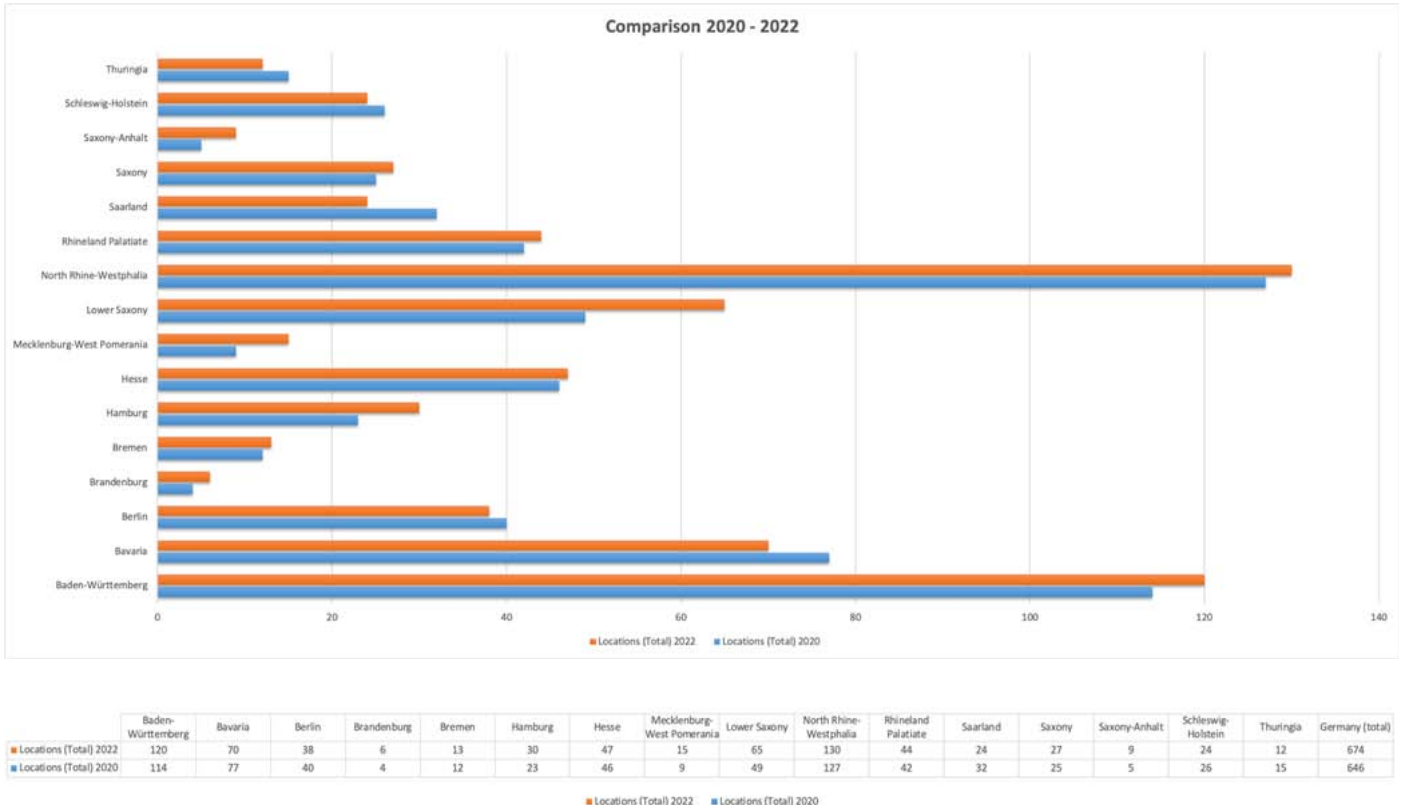
Since these beginnings, accompanied by the efforts of the early pioneers to maintain contact with Israel, Krav Maga spread rapidly around the country. A Google search for Krav Maga programs in Germany carried out in May 2022 revealed 674 national and international organizations as well as independent schools and derivatives (see Figure 1). Whilst

1 On the question of the early development of Krav Maga in Germany, we had sent interview requests to early pioneers known to us personally and through literature. Among those persons, who were the first to introduce Krav Maga to a German audience, one pioneer (in the following: Pioneer 1) agreed to an interview. Informed consent was obtained before the interview. The semi-structured expert-interview [Bogner et al. 2014] lasted 53 minutes. It was conducted in German, audio-recorded and subsequently transcribed verbatim [Kuckartz 2014]. For the purpose of publication, quoted passages were translated to English.

the slight difference between 2020 and 2022 suggests that the overall growth seems to have levelled out recently, nonetheless the public resonance of Krav Maga in Germany since the 2000s remains remarkable. Amongst the sixteen German federal states, Baden-Württemberg

(south) and North Rhine-Westphalia (west) have the most Krav Maga organizations, while it is less present, generally speaking, in the east and north of Germany (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Representation and distribution of Krav Maga organizations in Germany, comparison 2020–2022



Looking at the current top ten Krav Maga associations in Germany according to the number of locations, the data reveals that only three international Krav Maga organizations are represented (see Table 1). All others, including Germany’s leading number one and number two

organizations, are German businesses and trademarks. This ‘German drive’ suggests an interesting socio-evolutionary national development. In organizational terms, Krav Maga in Germany has become predominantly ‘German’ in only two decades.

Table 1: Top 10 German Krav Maga organizations (2022)

	Organisation	Number of Locations
1	Deutscher Krav Maga Verband (German Krav Maga Organization)	78
2	Krav Maga Defcon	68
3	Krav Maga Global (KMG)	66
4	Krav Maga Union	53
5	You can fight!	52
6	International Krav Maga Federation (IKMF)	34
7	German Krav Maga Federation	21
8	European Krav Maga Organization	20
9	Krav Maga RSC	18
10	Fighting System KM	15

According to results of our analysis which are presented below, Krav Maga success can be ascribed to having provided the promise of an answer to violence. The *Deutsche Krav Maga Verband*, one of the German representations of Krav Maga, encapsulates this promise in a nutshell – ironically, using the catchy English phrase: ‘We do bad things to bad people’.

SYSTEMS THEORY PERSPECTIVE

Adhering to Lewin’s *bon-mot* that ‘there is nothing as practical as a good theory’ [Lewin 1943] we analyse Krav Maga’s resonance in Germany through the lens of social systems theory, which, in its contemporary form, was mainly conceived by the German Sociologist Niklas Luhmann [Luhmann 2008]. The core idea is to take systems theory as a method for rigorous observation [Nassehi and Saake 2002] and apply it to the study of Krav Maga’s German career. This analytical approach has been successfully adapted to other martial arts in the past [for Wing Chun see Koerner et al. 2019]. Luhmann’s theory itself, which we use as a basis for our deliberations, starts from distinctions such as system/environment, and thereby produces its object of observation through the use of distinctions. Importantly, by disclosing its dependence on distinctions, in the context of systems theory, the procedure of observation becomes comprehensible as a methodological procedure.

By taking up a perspective based on systems theory, the perspective and systemic character of scientific observation is emphasized, making clear that everything that derives from here, derives through the specific use of specific theoretical lenses, using distinctions to ‘make the world speak’ [Koerner and Staller 2022]. Grasping another methodological approach, a different observational perspective and different distinction – e.g., analysing Krav Maga as a field of cultural production [Bourdieu 1983] – would lead to a different constitution of the subject matter and to different results [Nassehi and Saake 2002]. Generally speaking, what we see depends very much on which terms and categories we use within the process of ‘seeing’. In a constructivist manner, systems theory notes

that everything said and written is said and written by an observer [Maturana 1985].

The observation itself is based on distinctions. Within a systems theory approach, Krav Maga can be observed as a social *system* within the *environment* of other social systems, like the police, sports, economy, media, law [Luhmann 1986]. In this approach, the distinction between system and environment [‘system//environment’] is used. In the perspective of social systems theory, Krav Maga unfolds as a network of communicative acts, realized on two levels. On the level of practice, Krav Maga is *the communication* of moving bodies [Krabben et al. 2019], interacting with each other (training, sparring, fighting, etc.) in a mode analogous to ‘question and answer’. A 360° defence in Krav Maga training, for instance, can be seen as the answer to an outside slap to the head performed by another trainee, simulating a real-world attack. On a further level, Krav Maga is rooted in all *communications about* Krav Maga, e.g. as represented in textbooks, social media blogs or coach instructions. For Krav Maga as communication and communication about Krav Maga the distinction between fighting and talking (‘fighting//talking’) is put forward.

At this point it is worthwhile making some notes on how communication is seen within social systems theory. According to the seminal works of Luhmann [Luhmann 2008], communication can be defined as a threefold selection process, assuming the participation of an Alter (one system) and an Ego (another system or person). Basically, communication has always an information (component 1) and a distinct form (component 2) selected by an Alter, and someone (Ego), who decides to connect (component 3) – either with a punch, a block, a written or spoken word, or a gesture, etc. Communication is only put in place if someone (Ego) connects to what is said or done (by Alter). Each connection is in itself already a selection of information and form, which in turn build the reference point for further connections. Therefore, within social systems theory, communication consists of recursive selections [Luhmann 2008]. Along with this recursiveness, Krav Maga as a

social system based on communication emerges, and it can only emerge this way. In other words, through the observational instruments of systems theory, Krav Maga has no ontological basis – there is no root, no identity and no essence beyond communication. Observed as a social system, Krav Maga is the iterative process of selected communication, connecting to previous operations of the same type. Accordingly, the social career of Krav Maga is based on the continued selection of communication.

Furthermore, in line with social systems theory, a functional perspective on communication can be drawn [Luhmann 2008]. From this point of view, Krav Maga is to be analyzed as the solution for a given problem. This may be the most intuitive assumption system theory has to offer concerning Krav Maga: If violence occurs, Krav Maga is the solution. This aspect of problem solving is based on what we would call 'the internal variety of differences' that Krav Maga establishes in and through communication. For Krav Maga being functionally depicted as a problem-solver, the distinction between problem and solution ('problem//solution') is used.

Krav Maga's status as a social system can be further elaborated through the three levels of self-reference that allow social systems to establish contact with themselves and reproduce themselves [Luhmann 2008]. First, the level of *operation*, signifying the key event of Krav Maga. Second, the level of observation and *reflection*, on which Krav Maga observes itself and provides answers on what Krav Maga 'really' is. This level of self-reference is analogue to what is called self-concept in psychology: the concept of oneself about oneself. The third level on which social systems organize to refer to themselves is the level of *reflexivity*, on which Krav Maga as a social system gathers options for higher-order self-control. Within social systems theory, the existence of a system is not taken for granted or somehow ontologically backed up in timeless essence. Instead, social systems are the product of time-consuming operations that have to continue in order to establish and perpetuate the system's state

of existence. By identifying levels on which Krav Maga performs loops of self-reference, its social systems character can be shown. In this vein, Krav Maga's three levels of self-reference on which the system produces itself as a social system will now be outlined in more detail.

KRAV MAGA'S THREE LEVELS OF SELF-REFERENCE

Systems-theoretically, on the first level the key process and basic event of Krav Maga has to be identified. We assume that in the light of common social representations of Krav Maga *self-defence* can plausibly be assumed to be the systems' basic event. Krav Maga as social system is built around self-defence within the distinction 'self-defence//non-self-defence'. In general, social systems use codes to distinguish between their own and external sense orientations and reject the latter against the background of internal preferences. In this way, codes create and stabilize the boundary between system and environment, reduce what is possible in the system to what is definite, and cover system operations with a non-arbitrary structure. By designating *self-defence* as its own preferred value and at the same time designating *non-self-defence* as a negative value, Krav Maga, as a social system based on communication, ensures that operations relate to operations of the same type – as if on an infinite chain. At both levels of communication, at the level of fighting bodies as well as at the level of talking about Krav Maga, the operations of the system refer to self-defence, reproduced from operations that refer to self-defence.

In addition, on this level of basic self-reference Krav Maga holds a flanking code, specifying and clearing up the very basic event. As one example among almost countless equivalents is Picture 1: a screenshot taken from one of the most popular Krav Maga videos² on YouTube worldwide (with 51 million views, as of June 2022). It points to the globally valid special feature of Krav Maga: its effectiveness. Krav Maga is not only self-defence as opposed to non-self-defence. It is *effective* self-defence as opposed on non-effective systems.



Picture 1: Krav Maga's kick to the genitals, screenshot from 'How to win every fight in three seconds' (YouTube)

Krav Maga claims to be effective self-defence, thereby distinguishing itself from other presumably less-effective branches of related practices. By assigning to itself effectiveness as opposed to non-effectiveness within the binary code ‘effective/non-effective’, Krav Maga confers a special position within the landscape of contemporary self-defence systems to itself. It presents *effectiveness* as the very essence of Krav Maga – at least, that’s what the communication about it suggests. Or to put it in the words of Draheim, the author of two renowned Krav Maga books on the German market: ‘The unique feature of Krav Maga: effectivity by all means’ [Draheim 2018: 14]. In putting its code straight to this purpose, Krav Maga excludes itself from combat sports and martial arts. Krav Maga postures as the effective tool for survival in urban societies per se. As a German Krav Maga pioneer we interviewed puts it:

This strict focus on the needs of self-defence [...] did not exist [in Germany] at all in Ju-Jutsu and did not exist at that time in any martial art – where there was clearly this difference between sport or art, like Aikido or Tai Chi. I found it only in Krav Maga. (Pioneer 1, 2018)

With regards to the second level of systemic self-reference, social systems theory is geared towards Krav Maga’s *self-description* as a system. On this systemic level Krav Maga reflects about itself, using the distinction between system and environment and thereby (re) establishing it. The quotations and depictions taken from Krav Maga representatives so far belong to this level of self-reference. On the reflection channel of communication, Krav Maga is dealing with Krav Maga as a system different to the environment, in that sense, that ‘Krav Maga is not a traditional or competition-oriented martial art, but pure self-defence, and in this it is a fight for pure survival’ [Draheim 2016: 14]. Krav Maga is what it isn’t: not art, not sport, but pure self-defence.

Taken from its self-description, binary schemes such as pure//non-pure, mean//fair, effective//non-effective build the main arch of Krav Maga’s storytelling in the German context. Krav Maga is purely focused on self-defence whilst rejecting alternate purposes such as competition or health as prior orientations. Preferably, vital targets such as the groin are attacked (see Picture 1) and it strictly follows a ‘no rules’ policy [Draheim 2016]. According to this storyline, Krav Maga succeeds as the embodiment of effectiveness in the realm of modern self-defence. Krav Maga is badass [Katz and Katz 1989; Kopak and Sefiha 2014]. Importantly, it is not only Krav Maga’s German self-description that is structured by the binary schemes mentioned [Or and Yanilov 2008; Madsen 2014; Draheim 2016; Draheim 2018] but also the global level of reflection [Silva 2016; Karen 2017].

Thirdly and lastly, *reflexivity* creates the final level of Krav Maga’s systemic self-reference. Reflexivity in general consists of the application of a process on processes of the same type [Luhmann 2008; Koerner and Staller 2022]. As such, reflexive mechanisms provide features of higher-order systemic development, allowing for more self-control. Modern organizations, for instance, are continu-

ously facing the demands of a basically unknown future by using the concept of *learning of learning*. Learning of learning provides a general reflexive mechanism, allowing for a second-order learning and thus for organizational development independently of the respective contents. In science, observation of observation presents the key reflexive mechanism, allowing the system to control its main purpose of producing truth(s) – or at least evidence – as a basis for decision-making in several domains of modern society [Koerner and Staller 2022]. In politics, the application of power on power enables the controlled change of legitimate power.

Referring to the systemic key event of self-defence, reflexivity in Krav Maga could be determined as ‘defending self-defence’. The self-application of the key event is shown within Krav Maga’s internal procedures. First and foremost, all procedures related to the social closing and opening of the system can be understood as mechanisms of Krav Maga’s *second order self-defence*. For example, any individual’s access to training, workshops and camps is based on the organisation’s guidelines and regulations. The question of who may participate and under what conditions is by no means subject to arbitrariness. Access is strictly regulated, which protects and defends the system from unpleasant irritations and threats from outside, e.g., the ‘theft’ of important information.

Since Krav Maga – by the rule of a further reflexive mechanism – is only taught by certified trainers from within the system, access to trainer career and related education is provided with binding inclusion and exclusion criteria. These criteria ensure that only those who, from the system’s point of view, authentically represent the knowledge and skills of the system, enter the trainer level. Curricula are the place where Krav Maga’s key information is kept, generally not (or not entirely) accessible to external observers of the system. Curricula for practitioners and trainers ensure that only the content (problem situations, techniques, principles and methods of teaching) specified by the system is covered in training. Only through the mechanism of formal membership to a certain Krav Maga organization do participants gain access to this information as well as, in the capacity of trainers, the authority to show and explain them to a chosen audience. However, this does not apply everywhere and to every audience: As Draheim [Draheim 2016] states in his latest publication, referring to his first German book on Krav Maga from 2016: ‘At that time, I was not allowed to write about techniques because of the association membership, as my first book [dealing with methodical issues of training] was already regarded as a betrayal of secrets’ [14].

In this case, distributing knowledge without the system’s permission leads to the individual’s exclusion. By his own account, at the time of the publication of his second Krav Maga book, Draheim was already no longer a member of the organization but in turn CEO of a new autonomous authority ranking high within the top 10 German Krav Maga branches (see Table 1).

From the system's point of view, opportunities for exclusion are a central component of its reflexive structures. For Krav Maga, reflexivity in the way of defending self-defence allows for higher-order routines of self-control within the system and thus makes an important contribution to its social continuation. In terms of reflexivity leading to the exclusion of members, the aforementioned 'German drive' provides an interesting case. The fact that nowadays most of the top 10 national Krav Maga organizations are genuine German branches and trademarks could theoretically be understood as a result of Krav Maga's (not only including but also) excluding reflexivity.

The list of detached Krav Maga organizations indeed not only indicates an unintended failure of central control. Right from its very beginnings, Krav Maga in Germany was unable to show up as the one holistic organizational building in the same way as the Israeli Krav Maga Federation – which was founded 1978, and renamed in 1995 as the International Krav Maga Federation, or IKMF. For many years, in Krav Maga's early stages, the IKMF served as Krav Maga's primary authority.

However, on a higher level of systemic evolution, organizational differentiation itself creates a reflexive mechanism. Like in Matrushka puppets, the re-production of units of the same kind out of units of the same kind yields evolutionary nodes in the great chain of Krav Maga-related communication, marking the starting point for multiple differentiations in future. From this perspective, the dispersed set-up of Krav Maga organizations in Germany yields a central precondition for Krav Maga's national spread. Differentiation is an undeniable sign for resonance and connectivity in communication within the social system of Krav Maga and therefore indicates successful socio-cultural development.

SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

From a functional perspective, Krav Maga can be observed as offering solutions for perceived problems of modern societies. On the level of its systemic self-reference Krav Maga reveals a huge variety of internal differences that allow for communicative connectivity within German society. By establishing itself as geared towards issues of *self-defence* (vs. non-self-defence), Krav Maga appears to offer a viable tool for dealing with social violence in times of heightened feelings of insecurity. Although German society is generally quite safe for most citizens, it is remarkable that some have noted an alleged increase in the sense of a threat of violence among the general public [Groß 2019].

In Germany, martial arts have long been popular practices. Currently there is a diverse landscape of styles and systems. Many of them, like karate, judo, boxing, wrestling, taekwondo, and kickboxing, focus on sport. Around 600,000 practitioners are registered in formally organized sports teams at the moment [DOSB 2020]. These martial arts often include subbranches offering self-defence solutions as an

additional option for their members (e.g., Taekwondo Self-Defence). Indeed, self-defence dimensions seem to be in high demand, even beyond national martial arts associations. For instance, Germany holds the largest enclave outside Hong Kong and mainland China for Wing Chun. Wing Chun has its origins in the Chinese province of Guangdong and focuses not only on art but also incorporates aspects of self-defence [Koerner et al. 2019]. Wing Chun was by far the most popular self-defence system in Germany during the 1980s and 1990s.

Into this martial arts landscape, Krav Maga entered German society in the 2000s. In contrast to the set-up of multi-purpose systems like judo or jujutsu (which offer a combination of art, sport and self-defence), Krav Maga had the clear agenda of *purely* focusing on *effective self-defence*, exemplified by a rigorous 'no rules' attitude. Krav Maga's famous 'kick in the nuts', highlighted in literally every Krav Maga book on the German market [Draheim 2018; Madsen 2014; Sde or & Yanilov 2008; Wahle 2016], is emblematic of the whole system. Of course, when asking Krav Maga trainees about their motives for training, the core motive of learning how to defend oneself is often accompanied by discussion of health, fitness and socialising motives [Heil et al. 2016].

Nonetheless, Krav Maga seems to have benefited from the increased interest in self-defence in Germany, and has replaced Wing Chun in popularity. Its successful German career can be explained by the internal variety of differences it offers in providing both: it includes external adaptivity for ongoing social and individual demands for self-protection, and internal identity work that distinguishes the system from others. In sum, Krav Maga in fact provides solutions for some specifically contemporary German social needs and the internal demand for the continuation of internal operations. However, the system-theoretical understanding of Krav Maga's German career is not finished at this point.

PROBLEMS WITH THIS SOLUTION

From a systems theory perspective, Krav Maga's potential as a solution comes with problems. We elaborate this issue on two aspects: 1) the reduction of complexity and 2) the potential for radicalization.

1) Reduction of complexity

First, Krav Maga as a social system with the features described above is likely to reduce real-world complexity in three relevant dimensions:

- a) Within the social dimension, as exemplified in the German Krav Maga Group's leading slogan 'We do bad things to bad people', Krav Maga presupposes a 'we' on the one side (the 'good' side) and 'bad people' on the other side. Whilst the slogan is simple and easy to grasp, scientific data reveal real-world conflicts are way more complex and ambiguous [Collins 2009; Levine et al. 2010; Sandlin et al. 2016; Nassauer

2018]. The lines between allegedly innocent persons who just defend themselves and perpetrators with bad intentions are anything but clear-cut. For Krav Maga training, which aims to develop learners’ conflict management competence in a realistic and responsible way, the social dynamics underlying most real-world conflicts (e.g., threat to one’s own convictions and self-determination; the feeling of being right; the need to assert one’s position, etc.) pose great challenges. A sound understanding of the dynamics that cause and prevent conflict and violence need to be practically addressed through good training design. However, in Krav Maga training practice, a simple role-play of ‘us’ as the good guys versus the bad guys out there blatantly violates the social complexity of conflict.

- b) Within the content dimension, Krav Maga training suggests that it prefers ‘bad things’, generally referring to effective hard skills such as the ‘kick in the nuts’. However, just as conflicts in the real world cover a broad repertoire of interactions [Collins 2019], accompanied by internal conditions and expressive behavior (such as from fear to aggression, words to physicality, etc.), the corresponding Krav Maga training has to play on a continuum of de-escalating violent solutions, ranging from empathy, impulse control and active listening skills to physical self-defence. However, Krav Maga training with a sole focus on violent solutions falls short of the skills needed for competent real-world conflict management [Staller and Koerner 2020].

- c) Within the time dimension, a micro and a macro level can be differentiated. On the micro level of Krav Maga training a linear handling of violence reduces real world complexity. Linearity is in place when exercises and instructions are oriented towards ‘if x happens, then do y’. However, scientific data reveal a nonlinearity of social dynamics [Collins 2009; Nassauer 2018]. Especially in terms of violent encounters, empirical data emphasizes the idea of overlapping actions that can rarely be attributed to cause and effect. On a macro-level, Krav Maga tends to overestimate the social occurrence of violence compared to the past. The truth for Germany is that physical violence is not generally increasing. In fact, in 2021 compared to 2008, violent offenses fell by about 6% nationwide [BKA 2009; BKA 2022]. Whilst threat and coercion have increased in comparison, simple and grievous bodily harm as well as murder and manslaughter have decreased. From a macro longitudinal and global perspective this is also the empirically backed argument of ‘The better angels of our nature’ [Pinker 2012]. In his seminal work, Steven Pinker argues, with reference to data, that our modern societies, although still violent, provide a much safer environments for human beings than in former times. Generally, there is less murder, rape and homicide than in past centuries. Interestingly, it is precisely on the level of reflection that Krav Maga creates the counter-narrative of an always dangerous world and thus narrates the problem for which it offers solutions. In communicative terms, then, Krav Maga responds to itself.

Table 2: *Krav Maga’s reduction of real-world complexity in the social, content and time dimension of violence*

	Krav Maga	Reality (From a science perspective)
Social dimension (alter // ego)	“We vs. bad people”	Complex interactions; blurred lines
Content dimension (this // that)	“Bad things”	Continuum
Time dimension (this // that) Micro Level Macro Level	Linearity of action // reaction Increasing violence	Overlapping; Nonlinearity “it depends”

Krav Maga’s reduction of real-world complexity regarding violence is not the only way in which the solution appears to be a problem.

2) Radicalization

Second, as a social system with bias towards violence, and with all due caution, Krav Maga’s relation to the potential of radicalization should be acknowledged. That radicalization and Krav Maga may at some point join forces has already been shown in our recent study on the ‘Pedagogy of Terrorism’ [Koerner and Staller 2018]. Using the example of the *Muhajid Guide* for Islamic terrorists we have shown that Krav Maga appears as a functional solution for violent purposes even for an ideological antagonist. As stated in the Guide:

If you want to know how to fight and defend yourself, the best fighting style to learn is Krav Maga. This Israeli fighting style is really good because it not only teaches how to defend and counter-attack quickly, but also teaches you how to disarm an enemy who might have a knife or gun. [ISIS 2015: 20]

The relation between Krav Maga and processes of radicalization can be pursued further in terms of the results of a recent study of Bouko et al. [Bouko et al. 2021]. In their discourse analysis of 3,000 Salafist and 500 right-wing extremist posts on Facebook the following patterns have been identified as elements of radicalization:

- skilful storytelling to intensify conflict
- creation of a collective identity surrounding it
- In-group/out-group mentality: ‘us against them’
- Promotion of violent solutions
- Status upgrade through risky behaviour, e.g. using violence [Bouko et al. 2021]

Taking these elements, the potential parallels between processes of radicalization and the observation of Krav Maga as a social system, as introduced in this article, become apparent. Especially through the lenses of Krav Maga’s three levels of systemic self-reference we argue that the system is structurally inclined towards the potential of radicalization.

On the basic level of self-reference, self-defence places conflict at the core of Krav Maga’s communication. Stories that introduce technical or tactical concepts revolve around conflict, since otherwise there would be nothing to defend. Conflict is the prerequisite of Krav Maga’s communication. As described above, the conflict itself is depicted in a complexity-reduced way, concerning the second level of self-reference: ‘the good’ (we) vs. ‘the bad’ (others), as well as clear-cut action–response schemes that allow for the clear attribution of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behaviour.

The third level of self-reference, reflexivity, defends the Krav Maga art of self-defence from influences that favour a more complex representation of conflict and conflict management solutions. In that respect, the use of effective violence as *the* means of resolving conflict is rewarded with status. Likewise, bruises and injuries due to engagement in hard

training exercises (such as full-contact training) are also rewarded with status within the community: the competent use of violence and experiences with violence (and suffering pain and injuries) are stepping-stones towards the reputation of a ‘badass’ Krav Maga practitioner, even though such behavior could be viewed as risky from a training perspective as well as from a conflict management perspective.

The slogan ‘we do bad things to bad people’ condenses the system’s structurally-paved path to radicalization as described by [Bouko et al. 2021]: a complexity-reduced representation of conflict (good vs bad), that creates a collective identity in distinction from the others (the bad), and fosters violent solutions (bad things). As a slogan created by the system itself, it shows that the system preserves and defends its capacity for radicalization.

CONCLUSION

We have asked how Krav Maga appears under the lens of social systems theory. This lens approaches Krav Maga as a social system or a form of communication. Its successful career in turn is based on the recursiveness of communicative acts. Krav Maga’s German (and presumably therefore its wider international) success is made possible by an internal variety of differences, allowing for continuous internal reproduction and external resonance, revolving around interpersonal conflict in an allegedly conflictual society. *Within these social environments, Krav Maga’s key code that determines its basic operation is effective self-defence, accompanied by the self-description of being pure and using any means necessary to avoid the danger of being victimized through violent encounters.* Geared towards the German situation, Krav Maga co-creates the problem it presents itself as solving. In contrast to the factual prevalence of violence that has to be considered in a differentiated manner, Krav Maga sketches the image of an omnipresent threat of violence on the level of self-reference, for which it then provides effective solutions. The system’s solutions thus respond to at least partially self-generated problems. Yet, in a perspective informed by systems theory, this narrative brings serious problems, which are worth acknowledging.

As we have shown, two aspects among many may be of key interest and need further investigation: Based on binary distinctions, Krav Maga’s narrative is likely to reduce the complexity of real-world violence, oversimplifying the (by far not merely physical) character and (rarely one-sided) dynamics of social conflicts and exaggerating their empirical occurrence, at least for Germany. Moreover, some of Krav Maga’s structural features such as the predominant narrative of a ‘dangerous world’, filled with the notion of more and more ‘bad people’ for which the system provides functional violent solutions, indicate at least similarities to known factors of radicalization.

However, these and other issues call for future research. The same applies to Krav Maga’s global career. How did Krav Maga develop in other countries and continents? Is Krav Maga’s career and communication

comparable or different to the German situation? What about France, the United States or South-Korea? Does Krav Maga seem to be prone to the same sorts of dangers in other markets? Are other 'self-defence' arts in Germany or elsewhere equally prone to radicalization? Are there any counter-movements within the Krav Maga system, advocating a different approach to modern self-defence? What other effects does Krav Maga have on a social and individual level. For future martial arts studies, social systems theory provides a useful analytical tool for the investigation of these and further issues.

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