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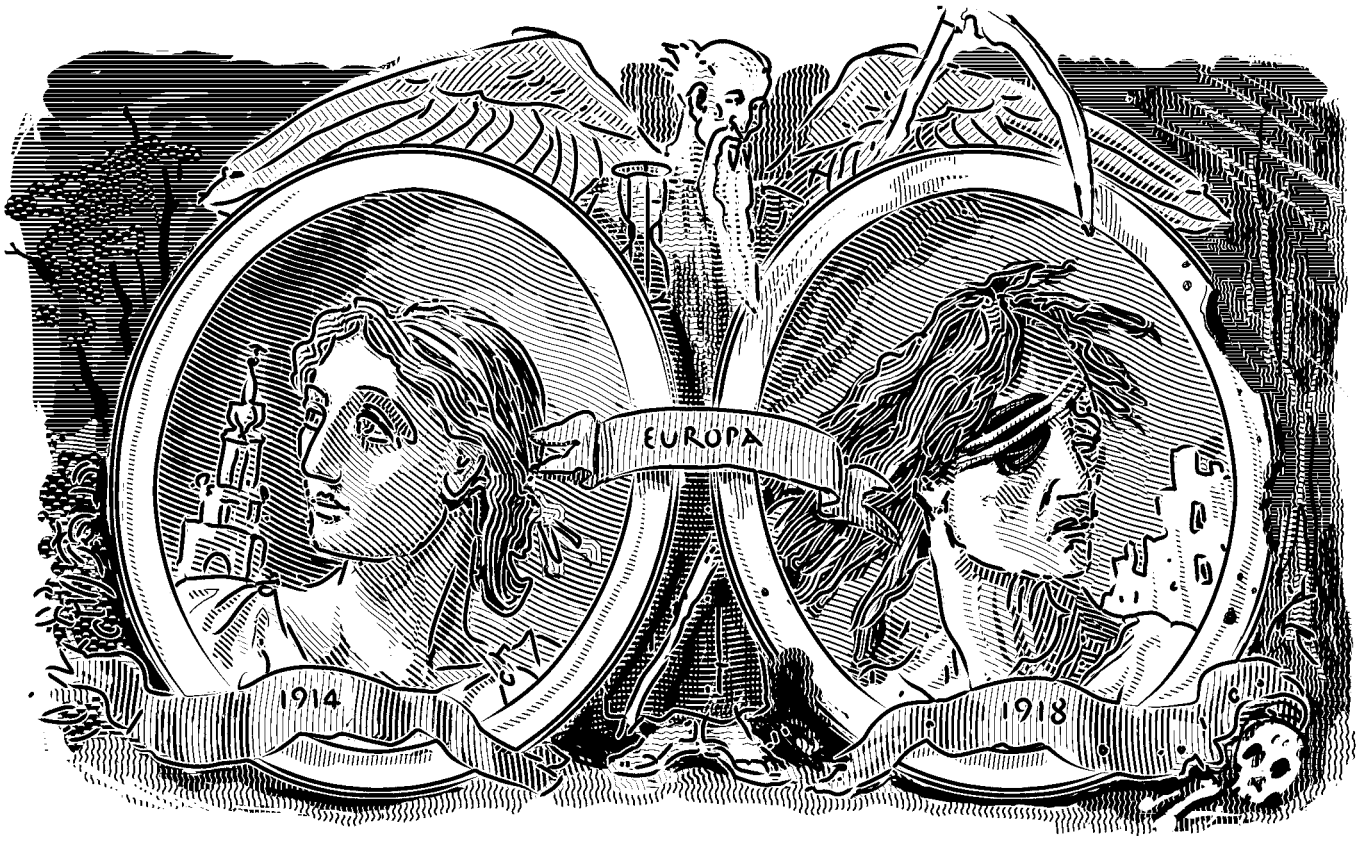
Essay by Algis Valiunas

On the Slaughter Bench of History



The story we've all heard goes like this: the 19th century elevated the confidence in peace and progress to religious certainty; and the 20th century introduced humanity to the experience of megadeath, which rather unsettled all previous certainties. In the 1960 poem "MCMXIV," Philip Larkin evokes the definitive break between the old order and the new disorder:

> Never such innocence,
> Never before or since,
> As changed itself to past
> Without a word—the men
> Leaving the gardens tidy,
> The thousands of marriages
> Lasting a little while longer:
> Never such innocence again.

This year marks the centennial of the Great War. The 1914–1918 conflagration kept that name until the substantially greater war of 1939–1945 necessitated a change—although the old name has never fallen entirely out of favor. Over the last couple of years, historians have been out in force, reconsidering the world before the world war, the events that led up to it, the fateful qualities of character of the epoch's leading men, the military deadlock on the Western Front, the unexampled and unimagined carnage, and the responsibility for the war's inception and its murderous great length, grotesque and frightful as a python that has swallowed whole a full-grown goat and will take a distressingly long time digesting.

Most of the historians whose books have recently appeared in the United States are English by birth or choosing. Charles Emmerson, author of *1913: In Search of the World before the Great War,* is an Australian educated at Oxford, and a member of the English think tank Chatham House. Christopher Clark, who wrote *The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914,* holds a Cambridge professorship. Peter Hart, author of *The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War,* is the Oral Historian of the Imperial War Museum in London. Peter Simkins, Geoffrey Jukes, and Michael Hickey, co-authors of *The First World War: The War to End All Wars,* represent decades of experience in the Imperial War Museum, the British Ministry of Defence and the Foreign and Colonial Office, and the British Army, respectively. Margaret MacMillan, who wrote *The War that Ended Peace: The Road to 1914,* is a Canadian with an Oxford doctorate, and the Warden of St. Antony's College, Oxford. Sean McMeekin, author of *July 1914: Countdown to War,* breaks the pattern; he is an American who teaches at Koç University in Istanbul. McMeekin notes his particular debt, which he says many other American historians share, to Barbara Tuchman's *The Guns of August* (1962). MacMillan for her part happens to have edited the Tuchman volume that the Library of America issued in 2012, which also includes *The Proud Tower* (1966), the spectacular mosaic portrait of the civilization that would come crashing down in 1914.

Tuchman wrote a half-century ago, and scholarship has superseded her in not a few details, but her basic understanding remains cogent. She began her researches for *The Proud Tower* with a notion of pre-war Europe quite like Larkin's in "MCMXIV"—"Never such innocence again"—but she came to think differently soon enough.

> The period was not a Golden Age or *Belle Epoque* except to a thin crust of the privileged class. It was not a time exclusively of confidence, innocence, comfort, stability, security, and peace. All these qualities were certainly present…. Our mis-

> conception lies in assuming that doubt and fear, ferment, protest, violence and hate were not equally present.

With acid wit Tuchman etches the blood-soaked heyday of anarchism: "So enchanting was the vision of a stateless society, without government, without law, without ownership of property, in which, corrupt institutions having been swept away, man would be free to be good as God intended him, that six heads of state were assassinated for its sake in the twenty years before 1914." In France, the Dreyfus Affair compressed a scattering of long-time political and religious antipathies into compact fiery loathing between the Right and the Republic: "It was a time of excess. Men plunged in up to the hilt of their capacities and beliefs. They held nothing back. On the eve of the new century the Affair revealed what energies and ferocity were at hand to greet it." Composer Richard Strauss was the latest hero of what Richard Wagner called the Holy German Art. The peaceable cosmopolitan French literary man Romain Rolland heard in Strauss's music Teutonic pride of morbid grandiosity: "Nietzsche, Strauss, the Kaiser—giddiness blows through [the German] brain. Neroism is in the air!"

The Proud Tower is a charting of atmospherics rather than a timeline of political and military decision. Tuchman writes, "The diplomatic origins, so-called, of the Great War are only the fever chart of the patient; they do not tell us what caused the fever. To probe for underlying causes and deeper forces one must operate within the framework of a whole society and try to discover what moved the people in it."

Kings, Ministers, Commanders

Margaret macmillan acknowledges the justice of Tuchman's approach, but observes that it penetrates only so far. "Forces, ideas, prejudices, institutions, conflicts, all are surely important. Yet that still leaves the individuals, not in the end that many of them, who had to say yes, go ahead and unleash war, or no, stop." The men on top are the men who matter most, and the most important thing about them is their inadequacy: "It was Europe's and the world's tragedy in retrospect that none of the key players in 1914 were great and imaginative leaders who had the courage to stand out against the pressures building up for war."

Christopher Clark is more emphatic still in pinpointing the actions of a limited cast of eminent figures as critical. To ask *why* the war happened "invites us to go in search of remote and categorical causes: imperialism, nationalism, armaments, alliances, high finance, ideas of national honor, the mechanics of mobilization." In this approach, "political actors become mere executors of forces long established and beyond their control." Clark does not say so, but Alexis de Tocqueville writes that the principal tendency of historiography in democratic times is to emphasize the influence of general causes and to deny the significance of particular individuals. This tendency reflects the truth about democratic times, when men are smaller than ever before, yet Tocqueville declares that the tendency must be resisted nevertheless, for it does away with the reality of free will and makes men even punier than they are in fact. Perhaps unwittingly, Clark follows Tocqueville's advice, and, in asking first *how* the war came about, he restores the few leading men to primacy. "The story this book tells is, by contrast, saturated with agency. The key decision-makers—kings, emperors, foreign ministers, ambassadors, military commanders and a host of lesser officials—walked towards danger in watchful, calculated steps." Yet why then would Clark title his book *The Sleepwalkers*—who are anything but watchful and calculating, and who therefore habitually find themselves on the edge of the abyss, which men wide awake easily avoid?

What leads Clark into this incoherence is that the power of unreason so damnably afflicts—compromises, misdirects, undermines, flummoxes—the reasoning of men who do decide the fate of nations, even the course of a civilization. Machiavelli famously taught that the man of consummate prudence, who reasons with perfect clarity, foresees all the possible consequences of every available alternative, and exploits the imprudence of his rivals or enemies, can master Fortune and win whatever prize it is he deserves. Prudence is meant to serve "the natural and ordinary desire to acquire"—to acquire power, dominion, wealth, renown, sexual pleasure. But that means reason is naturally subordinate to this desire; thus the force of desire masters one's reason only too readily. The truly prudent captain or statesman is the rarest of political men—almost an impossibility. The man who craves power or empire for himself or for his country more commonly finds his capacity for prudential reasoning overpowered by his consuming appetite. The man of action often acts as in a daze, or in a dream.

Books mentioned in this essay:

1913: In Search of the World Before the Great War, by Charles Emmerson. PublicAffairs, 544 pages, $30 (cloth), $19.99 (paper)

The Sleepwalkers: How Europe Went to War in 1914, by Christopher Clark. Harper, 736 pages, $29.99 (cloth), $18.99 (paper)

The Great War: A Combat History of the First World War, by Peter Hart. Oxford University Press, 544 pages, $34.95

The First World War: The War to End All Wars, by Geoffrey Jukes, Peter Simkins, and Michael Hickey. Osprey Publishing, 352 pages, $30 (cloth), $24.95 (paper)

The War That Ended Peace: The Road to 1914, by Margaret MacMillan. Random House, 784 pages, $35 (cloth), $20 (paper)

July 1914: Countdown to War, by Sean McMeekin. Basic Books, 480 pages, $17.99

The Guns of August; *The Proud Tower*, by Barbara W. Tuchman. Library of America, 1257 pages, $45

The Great War and Modern Memory, by Paul Fussell. Oxford University Press, 432 pages, $19.95

Love, Madness, War

Clark does recognize how true this is—for instance, how warlike men grow accustomed to emotion so violent it can easily skid into madness. In 1900 King Alexandar Obrenovic of Serbia invited the contempt and hatred of his countrymen, and especially of the political and military elite, by marrying a woman with whom every man of worthy manliness had slept. The royal offenses multiplied, and in 1903 a military conspiracy assassinated the king and queen. One regicide officer, Velimir Vemić, took as souvenir a portion of the queen's breast, which he lopped off and kept in a suitcase, exhibiting the relic for the delectation of honorable men. Ten years later, during the Second Balkan War, when a soldier under Vemić's command dawdled about obeying an order, Vemić shot and killed him. A military tribunal—of officers as honor-

able as himself—acquitted Vemić. However, there was sufficient civilian dissatisfaction with the verdict that Vemić was retried, by the Serbian Supreme Court. He was sentenced to ten months in prison, but military leaders strong-armed the king into granting a royal pardon in December 1913.

Peculiarities like these get noticed. In May 1914, Otto Gellinek, the Austrian military attaché in the Serbian capital, Belgrade, reported that the "praetorian element" exercised unfortunate influence in Serbian politics. This ascendancy of the fire-eaters in the Serbian officer corps, hostile to Austria-Hungary and craving Serbian expansion, increased Austrian wariness, and readiness for war.

The most hawkish Austrian principal, who had been ready to crush Serbian presumption for years, and to dispose of Russia, Romania, Italy, and Montenegro while he was at it, was Chief of the General Staff Franz Conrad von Hötzendorf. Christopher Clark, like Margaret MacMillan, highlights the effect of Conrad's private passions on his public ambitions. Severe depression crippled Conrad periodically, and his wife's death in 1905 left him especially debilitated. Then in 1907, during a Viennese dinner party, Conrad fell madly in love with Gina von Reininghaus, wife of a leading industrialist, mother of six, and half the general's age. Two weeks later, Conrad insisted to Gina that he could think of nothing but her and that she must marry him straightaway. Although Gina would remain married to von Reininghaus for eight more years, she and Conrad did begin an affair; her husband looked away, for he had a side dish of his own, and his business profited from the army's patronage. Conrad took to writing love letters with electric zeal that amounted to derangement. Actually to send the letters would have risked scandal, so he kept them in an album titled "Diary of My Sufferings"—over the course of eight years, more than 3,000 letters, some of them 60 pages long, which he never mentioned to his beloved, who learned of them after his death. Neither Clark nor MacMillan says so, but Conrad's erotic and graphomaniacal abandon sounds like the pathological enthusiasm that alternates with despondency in bipolar illness.

Whatever the diagnosis, love consumed Conrad: as he told Gina, he saw war as the means to attain the ultimate end, which was having this fabulous woman all for himself. To lead the Austro-Hungarian Empire to glorious conquest would raise him above all possibility of reproach, so that he could walk off with his elegant divorceé and respectable society would not dare to utter a peep in protest.

The private man cultivated the petty vanities of a lover growing too old too fast: he needed eyeglasses but refused to wear them, and the archive of his personal papers contains clippings of newspaper ads for anti-wrinkle cream. The public man sneered at the timid equivocations of mere diplomats. He breathed superb ultra-violence. Preventive war was the answer he proposed to every perceived threat, or slight, or cross-eyed glance, from any obnoxious foreigner. Conrad's raging blaze so troubled Emperor Franz Joseph that he sacked the chief of staff in 1911, though he would reinstate him a year later. By the summer of 1914, however, the emperor's nephew, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, heir to the throne and inspector-general of the army, had come to find Conrad's everlasting saber-rattling so offensive that he intended to discharge him for good.

Unreason Reigns

Franz ferdinand represented the surest curb to the Austrian cult of honor run amok; but he fell victim to the Serbian cult of honor at its fiercest and most reckless. On June 28, 1914, he and his wife made a ceremonial visit to Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, which Austria had absorbed into its empire in 1908. Patriotic Serbs considered Bosnia a rightful part of Greater Serbia, and some of the most patriotic were more than eager to kill for the right. With the inspiration of the head of Serbian military intelligence, who was also the head of the secret terrorist organization the Black Hand, a group of young fanatics assembled in Sarajevo for an act of dramatic vengeance and liberationist promise. One bomber just missed his

mark, and another lost his nerve; but Gavrilo Princip, a tubercular 19-year-old with a pistol, by chance or mischance, found himself so close to the archduke's touring car that he could not help hitting his targets. The assassinations were the trigger for catastrophe.

Kill locally, and ravage globally: thus reads the lesson, at least from this remove. But the murders needn't have touched off a world-historical event. Precisely those men temperamentally suited to inflict the most damage, however, occupied the decisive positions. The Austrian foreign minister, Count Leopold von Berchtold, wrote later that Conrad's relentless exclamation was "War! War! War!" Previously moderate figures in the upper tiers of the Austrian government and down through the bureaucratic ranks were suddenly set twitching for vengeance swift and scorching. To let the Serbs get away with this abomination would embolden all the numerous Slavic peoples and other non-Germans under Hapsburg rule: not an unreasonable supposition. The conviction, based on longstanding fear and hatred rather than clear evidence—that the topmost figures of the Serbian government, including the king and prime minister, ordered the assassination—became an article of faith to the Austrians: unreasoning fury assumed command.

The shadow of unreason fell upon leading men everywhere; seeing clearly and acting soundly became more and more unlikely. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was a volatile character in any case, all furious bluster one day and pacific contrition the next. Sean McMeekin observes that breech birth had resulted in the Kaiser's left arm being six inches shorter than his right: the Germans held martial prowess in greater reverence than any other European people, and their imperial warlord required help to feed himself. This shameful handicap made the peacock display of audacious mastery all the more urgent for Wilhelm; but then the surge of confident pride would abate, and Wilhelm could not be sure just what to think or what to do. When the German ambassador to Austria-Hungary, Heinrich von Tschirschky, advised restraint to the Kaiser in a June 30 telegram, Wilhelm raged at his underling's presumption, for he was incensed at the murder of Franz Ferdinand, whom he considered a friend and the best hope of a lasting Balkan peace. McMeekin writes, "In a flash, Germany's nervous, hesitating, Serbia-sympathizing Hamlet of a sovereign had been turned into a decisive Serb-hater ready to take up arms and fight—and the sooner the better, just as [the army Chief of Staff Helmuth von] Moltke had long advised him."

On July 5 Berchtold dispatched his chief of staff, Count Alexander Hoyos, to join the ambassador Ladislaus Szőgyény on a mission to seek German support for an Austrian war on Serbia, although the document that Berchtold wrote above the emperor's signature was not so blunt as that. In response the Kaiser wobbled pitiably—which boded well for no one—first apprehensive of what he called "a serious European complication," then offering staunch support for Austria-Hungary even if war with Russia should ensue, subsequently suggesting to his chancellor and military brass that Austria surely intended a punishment for Serbia less drastic than war, further dilating on the unlikelihood that Russia and France would dare go to war against such fearsome enemies, and, after assuring the generals that no military preparations were necessary, departing for his annual Baltic cruise.

Berchtold exulted in having received a blank check from the Kaiser, which was even co-signed by the customarily timorous Chancellor Theobald von Bethmann Hollweg. Berchtold intended to cash it promptly. He informed the emergency ministerial council that the German leadership, though fully aware that war with Russia was likely, backed peremptory Austrian military action against Serbia. Who could fault a little chicanery when dazzling victory lay within easy reach? Berchtold could see himself bedecked with every available distinction, as befit the pre-eminent military genius of the age. He was, suddenly, more impetuous than Conrad: hell-bent for glory. War fever had addled another man at the helm.

The shadow of unreason fell upon leading men everywhere.

Lamps Out

All the elaborate diplomatic sidestepping of the next three weeks could not stop the momentum toward cataclysm, as Berchtold led the charge and the war party in every great European capital fell into formation behind him. The generals and the statesmen in their thrall were convinced that now was the optimum time for war, or they were resigned to the inevitability of a war they did not really want once lever after lever was tripped in succession: an Austrian ultimatum that Serbia could only reject, further ultimatums, warnings against issuing ultimatums, partial mobilization here or there, demands that a potential enemy's mobilization must stop or else, and the mobilization that could not be stopped however the men supposed to be most powerful might have wished it. On July 28, Austria-Hungary declared war on Serbia; on August 1, Germany declared war on Russia, and two days later on France; and on August 4, after German troops entered Belgium, their gateway to Paris, Britain and Germany were at war.

The Germans' road to Paris closed abruptly, well short of the Champs Elysees, however: the Belgian army, derided as chocolate soldiers, presented the invader with surprising difficulty, and the French army rallied heroically from a staggering setback in the Battle of the Frontiers on August 22 and stopped the Germans cold at the Battle of the Marne on September 9. The upshot was a four-year-long stalemate on the Western Front, trenches and barbed wire extending from the North Sea to the Swiss border, a pandemonium of human devising, the prize achievement of modern industrial know-how, and the devil's playground of military intelligence, which had a virtually limitless supply of captive specimens on which to test its favorite strategic and tactical theories. These experiments of textbook generalship serene in self-assurance and indifferent to repeated disproof produced slaughter on a scale to which not even a Napoleon could have aspired. The quarrel between ancients and moderns was settled for good—at Verdun, the Somme, Passchendaele, on the Eastern Front as well, on the high seas, and even in the Middle East. This was the 20th century demonstrating its superiority to all previous contenders: headlong assaults into withering machine-gun fire, imbecile at first, and with experience downright insane; artillery hurricanes, shells launched by the millions and more potent than ever before, which ripped bodies to pieces or simply vaporized them; chlorine, phosgene, and mustard gas, illegal according to the pre-war Hague Conventions, unspeakable by any civilized reckoning, but just too effective not to use extensively, as all combatant nations did (and furnishing inspiration for Wilfred Owen: "the blood/Come gargling from the froth-corrupted lungs,/Obscene as cancer, bitter as the cud/Of vile, incurable sores on innocent tongues"); submarine warfare, a German specialty, limited to attacks on belligerents' ships at first, but eventually directed at neutral vessels as well (a lack of discrimination that heated American outrage to the point of war fever); the murder of civilians as punishment for unex-

pected military resistance, another instance of German *Kultur* educating the benighted barbarian peoples.

Moltke had long clamored for a good swift war, but as mobilization made conflict unavoidable he foresaw that this war would "annihilate the civilization of almost all of Europe for decades to come." After delivering the speech to the House of Commons that effectively guaranteed Great Britain would fight, the foreign secretary Edward Grey famously remarked, "The lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime." In the memoir *Blasting and Bombardiering* (1937), Wyndham Lewis, novelist, painter, former artillery officer, illustrated the Moltke-Grey thesis, in describing a reconnaissance patrol into No Man's Land:

> But at this point civilization ended.... What had we expected to see? Something, at all events. Whereas we gazed out over a solitary and uninhabited steppe. There was nothing.

The denuded landscape mirrored the ravaged psyche that created this perfect sepulcher for itself. Here was the work of unreason rampant, "the hollow centre of a madman's dream." Nearly nine million soldiers dead, 20 million more wounded.

Beyond Gethsemane

To mourn the extinction of civilization, or perhaps to curse this so-called civilization as a simulacrum that deserved extinction, and (for some) to try to erect a more durable ideal in its place, became the appointed task of the soldiers in the field and the more decent civilians who understood just how terrible the suffering was and how complete the ruin. At the foundation of civilized life had been the religious, the national, and the erotic ideals: Christianity, patriotism, and romantic love. The war splintered them all.

In Jean Renoir's celebrated film *La Grande Illusion* (1937), the aristocratic German officer Rauffenstein, a crippled aviator reduced to the command of a prisoner-of-war detail in a medieval fortress, has his bed and office in the castle chapel; the crucified Savior hangs above the altar on which a portrait of the Kaiser stands in place of the tabernacle. Greater contempt hath no man for the Christian mystery of redeeming love. Here was a characteristic French view—Jean Renoir had been a fighter pilot during the war—of Teutonic paganism.

But this imperial idolatry was nothing compared to the legendary atrocity that raised sacrilege to performance art. An Allied rumor that made the rounds and that every historian mentions is the crucifixion of a captured soldier, usually a Canadian, sometimes a Brit, sometimes a pair of Canadians, perhaps in a wood, more likely within view of the Allied trenches, by Huns who transfixed the sacrificial victim with bayonets and savored his every scream and convulsion. Did this really happen? Most authorities doubt it; but stories like this acquire an authority of their own.

There were Christ-like sufferers enough in the front lines, as the poets duly noted. Paul Fussell, an American professor of English and a World War II combat veteran, in his classic work of literary criticism and cultural history, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (1975, reissued in a new edition in 2013), cites several writings on the crucifixion theme. Among them are Siegfried Sassoon's poem "The Redeemer," which defiles a vision of sacred agony with a casually blasphemous capper, and a letter by Wilfred Owen to Osbert Sitwell, which larks sardonically about the preparation of recruits for their forthcoming Golgotha.

Yet Fussell, who has read practically every English poem of World War I and who comments on hundreds familiar and unfamiliar, unexpectedly says not a word about perhaps the greatest such poem, a cry of anguish so simple on its surface that its stark and bitter fury against God Himself might take a while to penetrate.

Gethsemane (1914-18)

The Garden called Gethsemane
  In Picardy it was,
And there the people came to see
  The English soldiers pass.
We used to pass—we used to pass
  Or halt, as it might be,
And ship our masks in case of gas
  Beyond Gethsemane.

The Garden called Gethsemane,
  It held a pretty lass,
But all the time she talked to me
  I prayed my cup might pass.
The officer sat on the chair,
  The men lay on the grass,
And all the time we halted there
  I prayed my cup might pass.

It didn't pass—it didn't pass—
  It didn't pass from me.
I drank it when we met the gas
  Beyond Gethsemane!

This is Rudyard Kipling at his poetic best. Only the final exclamation point seems unnecessarily emphatic. The rest is dead-on in its desolating monotone: the rhymes right out of *Barrack-Room Ballads*, not singing here, however, but blunted, like the emotion carefully withheld until the climax; the diction so plain that its austere gravity becomes apparent only upon rereading, or committing the poem to memory. One might prefer not to grasp Kipling's meaning here: the modern Gethsemane and Golgotha prove again and again beyond counting the powerlessness of the Cross.

Kipling's poem makes one think of George Grosz's drawing of the crucified Christ wearing a gas mask, though the poet's restraint is quite unlike the artist's blatant frightfulness. Yet Grosz's title, *Silence!*, clearly amplifies the indictment of divine indifference, or fecklessness, that Kipling issues by subtle implication. Grosz is not entirely unsubtle himself, though; his image not only evokes the suffering of soldiers who met the gas, but also suggests the agony of the god reduced to impotence, who knows his sacrifice has saved no one. This Christ wears the gas mask as a dog does a muzzle. His enforced silence is the ultimate insult and injury. Taking on human form teaches the ambitiously compassionate divinity the essential lesson: in this world pain and death win.

Kipling's poem and Grosz's picture are among many works of art and memory to emphasize the chilling isolation that the soldier facing wounds and death feels even in the company of his fellows who are facing the very same. Many writers saw that men ground down by this combat of unprecedented savagery often ceased to care about their solemn vows to duty, honor, and country that had propelled them eager and heedless into war. These soldiers felt the pull of a new nihilism.

Nothing Sacred

In the essay "inside the whale" (1940), George Orwell writes that the best-known books of the Great War "were written not by propagandists but by *victims*"; yet in pressing the argument that this literature is basically apolitical, he overlooks two crucial political consequences of this victimhood. First, these writers' conviction that their suffering was pointless laid the foundation for a wholesale rejection of political life: men were no longer morally obligated to fight for the nations of their birth, or indeed to profess any loyalty whatsoever to these discredited relics. Second, some of the same writers whom Orwell names among the classics of moral exhaustion and surrender to meaninglessness recovered their

political passion sufficiently to propagandize for the ideal order that would supplant the clapped-out old regime. Robert Graves, poet and author of the memoir *Goodbye to All That* (1929), and Siegfried Sassoon, poet and author of the autobiographical trilogy of novels *The Memoirs of George Sherston* (1928–1937), came to pledge allegiance to the utopia of international socialism. Henri Barbusse, whose 1916 novel *Le feu* (translated as *Under Fire*) became the supreme anti-war book actually written during the war, plunged even deeper into political folly, embraced Stalinism, emigrated to the Soviet Union, died there as a decorated Hero of the Motherland, and was given a state funeral. Traditional patriotism, then, was annihilated from two directions: complete disillusion with national politics, and utter intoxication with the politics of universal salvation.

And then there was the dissolution of the erotic life. In some of the saddest novels to come out of the Great War, the physical and psychic damage done to soldiers infects and destroys their relations with the women they love, or once loved.

Richard Aldington, poet, critic, biographer of D.H. Lawrence and T.E. Lawrence, served on the Western Front for two years and was wounded in 1918. In his *Death of a Hero* (1929), young Englishman George Winterbourne, mired in the "infernal cemetery" of the Western Front, finds his only sustenance in thoughts of his wife and his lover. "For George they represented what hope of humanity he had left; in them alone civilisation seemed to survive." But when he goes on leave and sees them, all intimate connection has been lost: "The women were still human beings; he was merely a unit, a murder-robot, a wisp of cannon-fodder." At last enough is enough: George commits suicide by enemy fire.

Ernest Hemingway served as a volunteer ambulance driver on the Italian front, until a bursting shell drove dozens of pieces of shrapnel into his legs. Jake Barnes, the hero of *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), is a former military pilot who has suffered an unspecified but definitive genital wound; unmanned yet impressively manly, Jake lives the sporting life in post-war Europe. Some sport: the atmosphere of desperate sexual energy and bitter erotic futility afflicts the main characters' every breath like searing poison gas. In *A Farewell to Arms* (1929), the narrator, Frederic Henry, an American ambulance driver on the Italian front, gravely wounded by trench mortar fire, strips war of all its imaginary nobility in perhaps the most famous summation of soldierly disgust and disillusion: "I was always embarrassed by the words sacred, glorious, and sacrifice and the expression in vain.... I had seen nothing sacred, and the things that were glorious had no glory and the sacrifices were like the stockyards at Chicago if nothing was done with the meat except to bury it." Hemingway connects the meaninglessness of war with the impossibility of escape into erotic happiness, and he thereby elevates pain without purpose to the reigning cosmic principle.

Ford Madox Ford volunteered for the British army in 1915, at the age of 41, suffered shell-shock and amnesia at the Battle of the Somme in 1916, returned to the front again and again, and was finally invalided home in 1917. His brilliant tetralogy of novels, *Parade's End* (1924-28), laments the obliteration of every faith on which English greatness had rested for centuries: Christian piety, the wisdom of the ruling class, and married chastity. Ford's protagonist Christopher Tietjens, the soul of aristocratic rectitude, an imperial bureaucrat of exemplary intelligence, sees the prospect of death in battle as the only cure for the moral rot at home, where his elegant slut of a wife bedevils him: "the best thing for him was to go and get wiped out as soon as possible." Tietjens will go mad with shell-shock for a time, but will recover his sanity sufficiently to divorce his wife—a violation of good form unthinkable before the war—and to secure genuine love with an innocent suffragette. Ford offers hope where most war novelists among his contemporaries sink into despair full fathom 500. But it is only by renouncing the public life which had been the native habitat of men such as Tietjens for generations, and by retreating into guarded privacy in which only the few near and dear matter at all, that Ford's hero is able to keep from disintegrating.

> The foundation of civilized life had been Christianity, patriotism, and romantic love. The war splintered them all.

This straitened hope, the withdrawal into strictly personal concerns, imperiled the soul of Europe as much as the full-bore nihilism of the irreparably shattered or the utopian fantasies of the thin-blooded on one hand and the bloody-minded on the other. Nobody understood the dire legacy of the Great War better than Winston Churchill, and the two great histories he wrote between the wars, *The World Crisis* (in six volumes, 1923-31) and *Marlborough: His Life and Times* (1933-38), constituted a heroic act of statesmanship, undertaken to secure a right understanding of war and politics in the face of nearly universal revulsion from the everlasting truth. Churchill honored the soldiers' suffering with broken-hearted magniloquence, and damned the unforgivable failures of military and political leaders, even as he reasserted the integrity of the political life as men had always lived it—the life of men in nations, which is perpetually subject to the storms of war, but which honorable leading men are sworn to direct with genuine prudence, a prudence superior to Machiavelli's brutal ideal, subordinating their natural and ordinary acquisitiveness and vanity to the good of the men and women who obey their commands, including the most terrible command to kill and die for their country. These were the greatest books to come out of the war.

Too many remained unconvinced. For most the supreme value was now life itself, splendid peaceful life, preserved at all costs, never again to be sacrificed to the Moloch of national pride or the Baal of individual vainglory. The civilized world averted its eyes as in Germany the worst of the immemorial passions revived and assumed a demonic intensity never seen before. Men of good will could only hope that the evil would not touch them; but hope is a theological virtue, not a political one. The supreme tragedy of the Great War is that it neutered the multitudes of decent men who ought to have prevented the rise of the foulest regime ever, and the eruption of another war so devastating that the evils of the erstwhile Great War came to seem acceptable by comparison. Never such innocence again, but with a violent turn of the screw: not the innocence of 1914 but that of 1918 and some years following, the innocence of believing that a war of attrition conducted by incompetents is the worst that men can do.

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