

**AS THE SOLDIER DIES,
SO THE NATION COMES ALIVE**

Richard A. Koenigsberg

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I. Introduction

Many political events of the Twentieth Century have been characterized by massive killing, dying and destruction: for example, the First World War, Russian revolution and Soviet genocides, rise of the Nazis and genocide of the Jews, and World War II. These events—preserved in our collective consciousness by a relentless stream of books and television documentaries—lie at the core of the “history” of the Twentieth Century.

We know that these events happened, but do we really know why? Do we understand the causes and meanings of these monumental episodes of destruction?

Historians conceive their fundamental task as describing or documenting what has occurred. Although events depicted may appear to be strange, irrational and bizarre from a human perspective, rarely are they described as strange, irrational and bizarre. Rather, historians believe that their fundamental responsibility is simply to provide the facts about what occurred.

Wars, for example, are discussed in terms of the political machinations and economic situations that lead to the onset of battle; the strategies that govern battles; the results and consequences of warfare. The underlying assumption is that there must have been good reasons for what happened. Given the bias of Western culture toward rationality, people find it difficult to imagine that historical events may have been generated by obscure, irrational forces.

Once events are written up in “history books,” they become part of our world-taken-for-granted. The process of creating a historical record—“documenting” what occurred—normalizes and confers dignity upon events, however strange and bizarre they may have been. Given

the weight of monographs and texts, people come to assume that there must have been good reasons for what occurred.

The assumption that we actually understand societal mass destruction is unfounded. We begin to reconceptualize the historical process by acknowledging that we do not actually know the causes of what occurred.

The destruction of life and property on such a vast scale during the Twentieth Century cannot be explained in conventional economic and political terms. To understand these events, we must consider the possibility that the historical process is governed by profoundly irrational forces.

II. Obfuscation in the Depiction of Warfare

I wish to interrogate the ideology that supports the willingness of a soldier to “die for his country,” that is, his willingness to enter battle knowing there is a possibility or probability that he will be killed or wounded. The Roman poet Horace proposed that it is “sweet and fitting to die for one’s country.” Nationalists put forth propositions such as “the individual must die so that the nation might live.” What is the meaning of this ideology that views dying for one’s country as necessary and beautiful?

Inherent within the institution of warfare is a tendency toward obfuscation: the will to avoid looking closely at what happens in battle. Accounts of warfare in history books and the media turn away from a full encounter with the consequences of battle: the dead or mutilated bodies of soldiers.

What’s more, there is blandness or conventionality in descriptions of warfare. Strange, astonishing and horrific things occur. Yet accounts of battle rarely convey a sense of strangeness, astonishment or horror.

Up until 1989, the focus of my research was Hitler, Nazism, genocide and the Holocaust. Having read many books on this topic at the New York University library, I strolled over to stacks on the opposite side of the aisle—and began leafing through books on the First World War.

I was shocked to discover the massive carnage, and surprised by the battle strategy—how men day after day, month after month, year after year got out of trenches and were slaughtered—cut down by machine-gun fire and artillery shells. I was bewildered by the inexplicable destructiveness and by the fact that people allowed the war to keep going.

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Equally surprising was the casualness or nonchalant tone with which historians reported these events. Why weren't they amazed by the endless slaughter? It seemed that they made little effort to step back and question what was going on—to interrogate the war's meaning. The First World War was a horrendous, chaotic, brutal, and often surrealistically absurd war. One feels that something unnatural and abnormal was occurring.

Yet the war is portrayed as if a more-or-less natural or normal event. Historians describe the quantity and persistence of the killing and dying and the suicidal nature of the battle strategies, but rarely step back and ask: What was going on? What was the death and maiming all about?

More generally, people avoid looking closely at the horror of warfare. We shield ourselves from reality—the anguish of knowing what occurs in battle—by telling ourselves that warfare is a firmly established form of social behavior that has existed since the beginning of civilization (and perhaps before the beginning of civilization). We reassure ourselves that because warfare has occurred so frequently, therefore it is “normal.”

We need not be disturbed by the massive death and maiming that occurred in the First World War, or in any other war for that matter. Why become surprised or upset? Societies have been waging war for thousands of years. Why act as if what occurred was unusual or extraordinary?

Denial of the reality of what happens in battle is reflected in the way warfare has been portrayed in documentaries and movies throughout the years. In the past 30 years, we have witnessed a significant change—movies and documentaries have become far more realistic than they once were. However, reflecting on the World War II documentaries that I witnessed as a youth (for example, [Victory at Sea](#)), I am amazed recalling how infrequently I saw soldiers killed or being maimed.

I'm thinking specifically of films of the naval battles in the Pacific between the United States and Japan. We witness bombs being dropped on aircraft carriers, artillery shells fired, and airplanes plunging into the ocean. Yet rarely did we witness the human cost. Based on these documentaries, it seemed that war was a Fourth of July celebration: The rockets' red glare, bombs bursting in air.

World War II documentaries depicted war as an exciting event that one might very much like to be part of: soldiers marching off to a foreign land with crowds cheering; bands playing with women providing

support and encouragement; heroic landings on beaches; massive, magnificent ships; airplanes soaring and dropping bombs. Occasionally, one notices someone falling to the ground.

However, such a detail paled in comparison to the overall splendor conveyed. Based on newsreels, documentaries and movies about World War II produced in the Forties, Fifties and Sixties, one comes away with the impression that war is something wonderful: an exciting display of energy; an event that makes one proud to be part of such a powerful, efficient and well-organized nation.

I suggest that such representations of war function as a distancing mechanism—allowing us to avoid a close encounter with what happened to the bodies of soldiers. These distancing mechanisms—denial of the actuality of death and mutilation—are part and parcel of the institution of warfare. People are attached to the idea of war, but *don't want to know what happens to the human body as a result of battle*.

As I describe the details of the First World War, please try to recover a sense of innocence. If what I describe does not seem to make sense, do not assume that it does make sense. Do not assume that historians—or anyone else—knew or knows what was going on. If what I describe sounds bizarre, strange and abnormal, do not assume that what occurred was not bizarre, strange and abnormal—simply because it is written up in history books.

III. The Magnitude of Destruction and Futility of the First World War

To convey a sense of the magnitude of the destructiveness of World War I, I provide the following statistics from a U. S. War Department table entitled “Casualties of All Belligerents in World War I” (see also [this table](#)). Data is provided for the Allied nations, which included Russia, France, the British Commonwealth, Italy and the United States; and for the Central Powers, namely Germany, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Bulgaria.

According to the U. S. War Department, there were a total of 65,038,315 forces—people that is—mobilized to fight in this war. Of the forces mobilized (civilians excluded), 8,538,315 were killed or died; 21,219,452 were wounded; and 7,750,919 were taken prisoner or reported missing. Total casualties (the number of human beings killed, wounded, taken prisoner or reported missing), in other words, were 37,508,686, or 57.7% of all forces mobilized.

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For some nations, the percentage of casualties reached astounding proportions. For Austria-Hungary, for example, of 7,800,000 forces mobilized, 7,020,000 or 90% were casualties; for Russia, 76.3% of 12 million forces were casualties; for France, 73.3% of 8,410,000 forces were casualties.

The magnitude of destruction that occurred in the First World War is matched by the extraordinary way in which battles were fought. On the Western Front, much of the fighting was done out of trenches, with one enemy line facing the other. "Attack" occurred when long rows of soldiers got out of a trench and moved into No Man's Land—running or walking as they advanced toward the enemy line. The enemy was equipped with machine-guns. With unimpeded vision, machine-gunners mowed down approaching troops with small risk to themselves.

There was a substantial probability that an attacking soldier would be hit by an artillery shell, or riddled with bullets from machine-guns. Here is the way historian [Modris Eksteins](#) (1989) describes the typical pattern of battles that occurred on the Western Front in France during the First World War:

The victimized crowd of attackers in no man's land has become one of the supreme images of this war. Attackers moved forward usually without seeking cover and were mowed down in rows, with the mechanical efficiency of a scythe, like so many blades of grass.

"We were very surprised to see them walking," wrote a German machine-gunner of his experience of a British attack at the Somme. "The officers went in front. I noticed one of them walking calmly, carrying a walking stick. When we started firing we just had to load and reload. They went down in the hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them." A Frenchman described the effects of his machine-gunners more laconically: "The Germans fell like cardboard soldiers."

The following is an account of the British attack at Loos in September 1915 that appeared in the German 15th Reserve Regiment's diary:

Ten ranks of extended line could clearly be distinguished, each one estimated at more than a thousand men, and offering such a target as had never been seen before, or even thought possible. Never had the machine-gunners such straight-forward work to do nor done it so effectively.

The enormous number of troops killed and vast proportion of casualties was a logical consequence of this method of fighting.

Eksteins describes the results of some of the early (1914) battles: German and French casualties had been staggering. The Germans lost a million men in the first five months. France, in the “battle of the frontiers” of August, lost over 300,000 men in two weeks. Some regiments lost three-quarters of their men in the first month. Total French losses by the end of December 1914 were comparable with the German, roughly 300,000 killed and 600,000 wounded or missing.

At Mons, Le Cateau, and especially at Ypres, most of the original British Expeditionary Force of 160,000 had been wiped out. As an example of the scale of casualties, the 11th Brigade of the British Expeditionary Force had, by December 20, only 18% of its original officers left and 28% of its men.

Eksteins concludes that during the first two years of war, the belligerents on the Western Front “hammered at each other in battles that cost millions of men their lives, but moved the front line at most a mile or so in either direction.” The war that began in August 1914 finally ended in November 1918.

If one substitutes “four years” for “two years” in the sentence above, Eksteins’ conclusion is one with which most historians concur. In short, after hundreds of battles in which millions of soldiers were killed or maimed, little had changed from a military or political standpoint, apart from the fact that now millions of young men were dead or maimed.

IV. What Was Going On?

As I’ve noted, historians until recently have been complacent in their analysis of the First World War. They assume that soldiers will “do their duty.” Yet what a radical form of behavior this was—getting out of a trench and running into machine-gun fire. The behavior of soldiers in the First World War contradicts our assumptions about an “instinct for survival.”

Eksteins interrogates the meaning of the First World War by raising questions about the behavior of soldiers:

What kept them in the trenches? What sustained them on the edge of No Man’s Land, that strip of territory which death ruled with an iron fist? What made them go over the

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top, in long rows? What sustained them in constant confrontation with death?

Eksteins notes that we are talking not of professional armies, but of mass armies—volunteers and conscripts in numbers that the world had never seen before.

The incidence of insubordination and sedition was minuscule in relation to the number of men under arms and in view of the conditions they had to brave. The question of what kept men going in this hell of the Western Front, Eksteins says, is “central to an understanding of the war and its significance.” He summarizes the fundamental question as follows:

What deserves emphasis in the context of the war is that, despite the growing dissatisfaction, the war continued, and it continued for one reason: the soldier was willing to keep fighting. Just why he kept going has to be explained, and that matter has often been ignored.

Political scientist [Jean Elshtain](#) (1987) observes that the First World War was the “nadir of nineteenth-century nationalism.” Mounds of bodies were sacrificed in a “prolonged, dreadful orgy of destruction.” “Trench warfare” it was called and it meant “mass, anonymous death.” In the first day of the Battle of the Somme, July 1, 1916, Elshtain notes, 60,000 men were killed or wounded of the 110,000 on the British side who got out of the trenches and began to walk forward along a 13-mile front.

Elshtain places questions about the First World War within the framework of broader questions about nationalism, war and mass-death. She observes, “We still have trouble accounting for modern state worship:” the “mounds of combatants and noncombatants alike sacrificed to the conflicts of nation-states.”

[Ronald Aronson](#) (1984) also raises this larger question of the persistence and meaning of mass-death in warfare:

In contemplating history as the slaughter-bench at which the happiness of peoples, the wisdom of States, and the virtue of the individual have been sacrificed, a question necessarily arises: To what principle, to what purpose, have these monstrous sacrifices been made?

Elshtain and Aronson point us in the direction of explanatory concepts. Elshtain speaks of “modern state worship” and of combatants being “sacrificed to the conflicts of nation-states,” while Aronson suggests viewing history as a slaughter-bench requiring “monstrous sacrifices.”

V. Reification of the Nation State

The phrase, “The individual must die so that the nation might live” has often been put forth in the history of Western nationalism. This phrase reifies the nation-state, treating nations not as social constructions, but as objects that substantially exist.

This phrase suggests that countries exist as entities in their own right, separate and distinct from the individuals or human beings that reside within them. If nations are not equivalent to the people who are contained within them, however, what is it that “lives” when a nation lives?

So pervasive is the ideology of nationalism that when speaking of “France” or “Germany” or “America,” we must remind ourselves that these words refer to ideas or concepts created by human beings rather than to concrete objects or entities that substantially exist.

A statement like “The individual must die so that the nation might live” suggests that nations have a life of their own; as if countries are living creatures, the preservation of which is more significant or valuable than the preservation of the lives of actual human beings.

In war, human bodies are sacrificed in the name of perpetuating a magical entity, the body politic. Sacrificial acts function to affirm the reality or existence of this sacred object, the nation. Entering into battle may be characterized as a devotional act, with death in war constituting the supreme act of devotion.

[Maurice Barrès](#) was a prominent French nationalist who published several books during the course of the First World War containing letters written by French soldiers—to their parents, relatives and friends—before entering battle. Many of the soldiers whose letters were preserved and cited by Barrès subsequently were killed.

The following is a typical excerpt (in Barrès, *The Undying Spirit of France*, 1918) written by French soldier George Morillot—who died on December 11, 1914—to his parents:

If this letter comes into your hands it will be because I am no more and because I shall have died the most glorious of

deaths. Do not bewail me too much; my end is the most to be desired. Speak of me from time to time as of one of those men who have given their blood that France may live and who has died gladly.

Since my earliest childhood I have always dreamed of dying for my country. Let me sleep where the accident of battle shall have placed me, by the side of those who, like myself, shall have died for France; I shall sleep well there. My dear Father and Mother, happy are those who die for their native land. What matters the life of individuals if France is saved?

The phrase “What matters the life of individuals if France is saved” contains the essence of the ideology that generated the First World War and allowed it to continue. People imagined that they were fighting in order to rescue the life of their own nation. The French soldier speaks about the French nation as if it were a concrete, tangible entity whose “life” is more valuable than his own.

He proclaims that he wishes to be remembered as one of those men who has “given their blood that France might live.” This image evokes a blood transfusion—where the life-sustaining substance of an individual body passes into a collective body, acting to keep it alive. What is the nature of this structure of thought or fantasy that gives rise to the belief that the death of the soldier—his offering of blood—functions to keep one’s nation alive?

VI. Willingness to Die as Declaration of Devotion

As soldiers give over their bodies to their countries, so do national leaders and non-combatants applaud or extol the virtue of young men who demonstrate a willingness to sacrifice their lives for the sake of their nations. Here is what Maurice Barrès (in [*The Faith of France*](#), 1918) had to say about French soldiers dying on a daily basis during the First World War:

Nothing more beautiful yet more difficult to understand than these boys, today cold in their graves, who gave themselves for France. With all the strength of their young lives they urged preparedness; they foresaw that this would be their own downfall, yet joyously they rushed to meet it.

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And here are the words of P. H. Pearse (Martin in [Kamenka](#), 1976), founder of the Irish revolutionary movement, upon observing the daily carnage in France:

The last sixteenth months have been the most glorious in the history of Europe. Heroism has come back to the earth. It is good for the world that such things should be done. The old heart of the earth needed to be warmed with the red wine of the battlefield. Such august homage was never before offered to God as this, the homage of millions of lives given gladly for love of country.

How extraordinary to hear prominent political figures in the Twentieth Century declaring that soldiers in war “joyously” rushed to meet their downfall, and that the heart of the earth needed to be “warmed with the red wine of the battlefield.” Yet images like these convey the thought processes that sustained four years of warfare, or slaughter. Perhaps Pearse’s words unlock the meaning of the First World War. Perhaps this war represented a massive sacrificial ritual—millions of lives “given gladly for love of country.”

Willingness to enter battle manifests devotion to one’s nation: a “pledge of allegiance” in its most radical form. A reporter during the First World War recalled an encounter with a wounded Canadian soldier:

As I looked into his face and saw the look of personal victory over physical pain, I gripped him by the hand and said: “My good man, when you go back home to Canada, back to your home, you need not tell them that you love your country, that you love your home—just show them your scars.”

Wounds represent a testimonial, proving that one’s devotion is sincere. “Scars” declare that the soldier loves his country.

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Barrès claimed that the French make war as a “religious duty.” He says that French soldiers “die for France,” waging war in the spirit of martyrs.” He cites Roland in the medieval Song of Roland murmuring with dying breath: “O Land of France, most sweet are thou, my country”

and claims that it was with “similar expressions and the same love” that French soldiers were dying in the First World War.

Barrès reproduces a letter written by Jean Cherlomey to his wife before entering battle: “Au revoir. Promise to bear no grudge against France if she requires all of me.” He says that the dying words of Captain de La Villemarque were “Au revoir, it is for the sake of France” and that Corporal Voituret declared before he died, “Vive la France, I am well content; I am dying for her sake.”

Though these declarations of devotion to one’s nation sound archaic, they articulate the psychological dynamic that lies at the heart of the ideology of nationalism and war. Why does Corporal Voituret proclaim “Long live France” before he dies in battle? In what sense does the death of a soldier endow one’s nation with more abundant life?

War may be viewed as a sacrificial ritual performed in the name of the nation-state. It is as if death in battle functions to transfer energy within a human body—the life-force contained within the body of a soldier—into a body politic, endowing the nation with renewed vigor. As soldiers die, so do nations come alive.

In her study of the image of the Western soldier, Elshtain found that the warrior or combatant presents himself in his most prototypical guise “not as a bloodthirsty militant.” Rather, by his own account of wartime experience, he constructs himself as one who places the highest value “not on killing but on dying—dying for others.”

Elshtain cites the writings of [J. Glenn Gray](#) (1998) who examined the impulse to self-sacrifice characteristic of warriors—who from compassion would “rather die than kill.” Gray calls the freedom of wartime a communal freedom “as the ‘I’ passes into a ‘we,’” and human longing for community with others “finds a field for realization.” Communal ecstasy, Elshtain says, explains the willingness to sacrifice and “gives dying for others a mystical quality.”

We’ve observed that the central battle strategy of the First World War consisted of unrelenting attacks upon the enemy front that almost always were futile and resulted in an astonishingly high rate of casualties. The [Australian Official History](#)—discussing one such battle that resulted in 23,000 casualties—angrily condemned the battle strategy of “throwing several parts of an army corps, brigade after brigade, twenty times in succession against one of the strongest points in the enemy’s defense.”

The problem, however, Eksteins observes, was that the determination and grit of a unit came to be measured by the number of casualties:

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“Officers whose companies incurred light casualties were suspect, so they pressed their attacks with appropriate vigor.” Large numbers of battle-casualties testified to the sincerity of the effort: demonstrating the depth of one’s devotion to the sacred ideal, one’s nation. When an officer led an attack that produced few casualties, it was as if he was insufficiently sincere—lacked faith in the cause.

According to this perverse logic, an officer’s performance was evaluated in terms of the number of casualties that occurred during battle. If only a few casualties were incurred, the officer might be judged to have not tried hard enough; whereas a large number of casualties testified to the magnitude of his devotion.