

**FIRST WORLD WAR AS  
SACRIFICIAL RITUAL**

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## Contents

- I. Aztec Warfare
- II. The First World War
- III. Why the Perpetual Slaughter?
- IV. The Body and Blood of the Soldier Give Rise to the Reality of the Nation
- V. War as Potlatch
- VI. Warfare as Truth
- VII. The Nation-State Kills Its Own Soldiers

## I. Aztec Warfare

The Aztecs conceived warfare as a “sacred activity” whose purpose was to capture enemy soldiers—in order to sacrifice them to the gods. War was required to provide food and energy for the sun so that it could continue on its course.

When the four original gods decided to create the sun, [Burr Brundage](#) (1986) states, they first had to “create war so that the hearts and blood needed by the sun would be available.” According to [Jacques Soustelle](#) (1970), the Aztecs believed that the sun was born “from sacrifice and blood.”

When the hand-to-hand fighting began in a typical Mexican war, Soustell explains, the battle took on an aspect completely unlike anything known in Western civilization. The purpose was not to kill the enemy, but to capture him so that he could be offered as a sacrifice to the gods.

Specialists with ropes followed the fighting men in order to bind those who had been thrown down before they could recover consciousness. At the end of a battle, the Aztecs returned home with defeated warriors as captives, who subsequently became victims in the sacrificial ritual.

Brundage describes this ritual as follows:

At the foot of the ascent the captor delivered his captive over to the priests, who then dragged him up by the hair if he did not himself make the ascent. On reaching the level of the summit he was immediately thrown backward over the techcatl, four priests bearing heavily down on the limbs, while the fifth one crushed his throat.

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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The sixth priest struck a powerful blow in the center of the up-thrust chest and broke through the sternum. Reaching into the wound he ripped out the still-beating heart and turning, held it skyward for a moment—an offering to the god.

The logic of this Aztec sacrificial ritual was not complex. According to [Lopez Austin](#), “As long as men could offer blood and the hearts of captives taken in combat, the power of the sun god would not decline, and he would continue on his course above the earth.”

To keep the sun “moving in its course so that darkness should not overwhelm the world forever,” Soustell says, it was necessary to “feed it every day with its food, ‘the precious water’—that is, with human blood.” Sacrifice was a “sacred duty toward the sun and a necessity for the welfare of men. In the absence of sacrifice, the “very life of the world would stop.”

The purpose of the life of an Aztec warrior was to capture enemy soldiers in order to feed the sun. When the midwife cut the umbilical cord of a baby boy, she harangued him (Soustell, 1970):

Dear son, you must understand that your home is not here where you have been born, for you are a warrior. Your mission is to give the sun the blood of enemies to drink and feed Tlaltecuhli, the earth with their bodies. Your country, your inheritance and your father are in the house of the sun, in the sky.

Just as the Aztec warrior was fated to engage in battle in order to capture warriors for sacrifice, so too were the warriors of other Mexican city-states. Their gods also required nourishment. If an Aztec warrior was captured, he would be sacrificed to the god of the other city-state.

## II. The First World War

Unlike the Aztecs, we in the West do not conceive that sacrifice is the purpose of warfare. Rather, we imagine that wars are fought for “real” reasons or purposes—such as conquest, acquisition of territory, economic gain, defending one’s homeland, etc. We understand the death or maiming of soldiers in battle as by-products of the attempt to achieve political objectives.

We do not say that wars are initiated in order to produce sacrificial victims. Yet the case study that I now will examine—the First World

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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War—produced more victims in four years than were produced in the entire history of the Aztec Empire.

The First World War took place August 1914 to November 1918 and involved many of the world's nations. Casualties of World War I are estimated at 9 million dead and 30 million wounded or missing.

The First World War is famous for the way battles were fought. Each side expected a quick victory, which did not occur. Soon hundreds of miles of trenches were built on the Western Front, with French and British soldiers digging themselves in on one side, and German soldiers on the other.

Battles occurred when troops got out of their trenches and moved toward the opposing trench, hoping to survive the trip through “No Man’s Land,” cut through the barbed wire, and break through the enemy line.

One typical British “attack” that occurred during the Battle of the Somme in July 1916 is described as follows in the German regimental diary:

Ten columns of extended line could clearly be discerned. Each advancing column was estimated at more than a thousand men, offering such a target as had never been seen before, or thought possible. Never had the machine-gunners such straightforward work to do nor done it so effectively. They traversed to and fro along the enemy's ranks unceasingly.

In August 1916, German troops counter-attacked. War correspondent Philip Gibbs saw them advance towards the British trenches shoulder to shoulder, “like a solid bar” ([Gilbert](#), 1994). It was “sheer suicide”:

I saw our men get their machine-guns into action, and the right side of the living bar frittered away, and then the whole line fell into the scorched grass. Another line followed. The German soldiers were tall men, and did not falter as they came forward. But it seemed to me they walked like men conscious of going to death. They died.

This tactic of assaulting enemy trenches with massive numbers of troops—the central military strategy of the First World War—continued to be employed throughout the war despite the perpetual, endless

slaughter that continued to occur and the absence of substantial results.

For four years 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 Germans attacked Verdun in 1916. During six months more than 23 million shells were fired by the two contending armies, an average of more than 100 shells a minute. Verdun remained in French hands, but the death toll there was 650,000 men.

When added to that of the earlier battle of the Somme, this made a five-month death toll of almost a million men. It was an average of more than 6,600 men killed every day, more than 277 every hour, nearly five each minute.

### III. Why the Perpetual Slaughter?

We're dealing with something extraordinary. Each time I return to study this war, I am stunned and deeply disturbed. What was going on? In the face of enormous numbers of casualties—and the fact that most assaults failed—why did generals continue to employ the futile battle strategy described above? Why did soldiers rarely mutiny or fail to obey orders?

[Eksteins](#) (1989) poses the question, “Why did soldiers continued to fight?”

What kept them in the trenches? What made them go over the top, in long rows? What sustained them in constant confrontation with death? We are talking here not of professional armies, but of mass armies, of volunteers and conscripts, such as the world has not seen before. The incidence of insubordination was minuscule in relation to the number of men under arms and in view of the conditions they had to brave.

In order to understand the meaning of this war, one must begin by articulating the fundamental structure of thought—the foundational idea—out of which everything grew. The First World War built upon the ideology of nationalism.

When war was declared in 1914, excited crowds gathered and celebrated in every major city. One million volunteers joined the British

army during the first year. War Office recruiting stands were inundated with men persuaded of their duty to fight. Soldiers were cheered on as they rushed off to battle.

Combatants joined the military and entered into battle—and civilians supported their willingness or desire to do so—because they believed it was their duty to fight to defend their nation. What occurred during the First World War grew out of the glorification of and attachment to “countries.” Monumental orgies of destruction were undertaken and justified in the name of entities or sacred-objects given names like France, Germany, England, Russia, Italy, etc.

What are “countries” and why do people get so excited about them? What is the relationship between our attachment to nations, on the one hand, and the willingness to kill, die and bear unendurable suffering on the other?

John Lennon asked people to conceive of a world not defined or demarcated by nation-states: to envision human existence in the absence of countries. [“Imagine there’s no country.”](#) Lennon sang, “It isn’t hard to do.” As it turns out, it is extremely difficult for people to imagine life in the absence of countries.

### IV. The Body and Blood of the Soldier

#### Give Rise to the Reality of the Nation

During the course of the First World War, soldiers’ bodies were fed into the jaws of battle under the assumption that the “life” of the nation was more significant than the lives of human beings. Individual bodies were sacrificed in the name of the greater glory of the body politic. The First World War represented the acting out of an ideological proposition: “The individual must die so that the nation might live.”

In war, the body and blood of the sacrificed soldier give rise to the reality of the nation. Killing and dying substantiate the idea that nations exist. The sound and fury of battle serve to convince people that something profound and real is occurring. Warfare testifies to the existence of nations.

Battle—the bodies of dead and wounded soldiers—anchors belief in material reality—persuading us that countries are more than social constructions. Surely, we reflect, human beings would not—could not—kill and die in the name of nothing.

John Horne (in [Coetzee and Shevin-Coetzee](#), 1995) analyzed the published letters of French soldiers who fought in the war. The theme

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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of many of these letters was the idea of national sacrifice as a source of redemption and renewal for the French nation.

Shortly before his death, Robert Dubarle wrote of the glorious privilege of “sacrificing oneself, voluntarily.” Contemplating the warriors who had fallen around him, French soldier J. Saleilles wondered whether their “gift of blood” was not the “supernatural source of the renewal of life which must be given to our country.” If this were the case, then it would be unacceptable to “wail and lament like pagans in the face of all these dead.”

F. Belmont—moved by attending a field mass with 500 soldiers—wrote that the war at least has a “purifying role.” By virtue of sacrifice and suffering “regeneration occurs.” A Catholic priest put forth a similar idea: “We await the decisive all-out assault. So many sacrifices! May they help bring the resurrection of a greater, more beautiful and truly Christian France.”

Pierre-Maurice Massoon, a Catholic academic, wrote in April 1916 that one needed an almost “religious faith in one’s country to accept such an immolation without revolt and moral disarray.” Religious faith! The First World War was rooted in religious faith—in nations.

Why did people believe that suffering and sacrifice would bring about the regeneration or resurrection of France? What does it mean to say that the renewal of the life of one’s nation depends upon the “gift of blood” provided by soldiers?

These phrases link the death of the soldier to the survival or more abundant life of one’s nation. What logic leads to the belief that a nation benefits by virtue of the death of its soldiers?

When injury or death occurs on the field of battle: this is the moment at which blood contained within the body of the soldier flows out of him, and into the body politic. The body and blood of the soldier—at that moment—act to energize or regenerate the nation: bring it back to life.

Writing in the midst of the war, writer [Maurice Barrès](#) (1918) praised French soldiers dying on a daily basis:

Oh you young men whose value is so much greater than ours! They love life, but even were they dead, France will be rebuilt from their souls. The sublime sun of youth sinks into the sea and becomes the dawn which will hereafter rise again.

Soustell notes that the Aztecs believed that the warrior who died in battle or upon the stone of sacrifice “brought the sun to life,” becoming

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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a “companion of the sun.” The sun was the “reincarnation of a dead warrior.”

Barrès’ fantasy about the fate of the French soldier is nearly identical to the Aztec fantasy. The Aztecs imagined that sacrificed soldiers would rise and become companions to the sun. They would bring the sun to life.

Dead French soldiers, Barrès claims, were the “sublime sun of youth” who would sink into the sea and become the “dawn which will rise again.” France would be “rebuilt from their souls.”

British political leader David Lloyd George stated ([Haste](#), 1977) that every nation was “profligate of its manpower,” and conducted its war activities as if there were no limit to the number of young men who were fit to be “thrown into the furnace to feed the flames of war.”

He described the First World War as a perpetual, driving force that “shoveled warm human hearts and bodies by the millions into the furnace” ([Gilbert](#), 1994). Just as the Aztecs believed that the hearts and blood of sacrificial victims were required in order to keep the sun god alive, so during the First World War millions of hearts and bodies were sacrificed in order to preserve the lives of nations.

Infantryman Coningsby Dawson fought in the First World War and published two books during the war ([Carry On](#), 1917; [The Glory of the Trenches](#), 1918) in which he conveyed the experiences and motivations of British soldiers. These men, he said

In the noble indignation of a great ideal, face a worse hell than the most ingenious of fanatics ever planned or plotted. Men die scorched like moths in a furnace, blown to atoms, gassed, tortured. And again other men step forward to take their places well knowing what will be their fate. Bodies may die, but the spirit of England grows greater as each new soul speeds upon its way.

What an astonishingly direct expression of the fantasy that supports the ideology of warfare! Dawson says that bodies may die, but the spirit of England grows greater. However, what he actually seems to be saying is that bodies may die, therefore the spirit of England grows greater.

What this passage suggests is a mathematical relationship between the number of soldiers that perish in battle and the greatness of one’s own nation. One’s country is great to the extent that it is able and willing to sacrifice the lives of its soldiers. Willingness to sacrifice one’s soldiers testifies to the abundant spirit of one’s nation.



### V. War as Potlatch

In December 1915, Douglas Haig was appointed commander-in-chief of the British Expeditionary Force. The British believed that Haig was someone with the courage and resolve to sustain the heavy losses that would be necessary to break through the German line.

On July 1, 1916, after an eight-day artillery bombardment in which 1537 British guns fired 1,723,873 rounds, Haig began the attack at the Somme that was designed to bring victory to the Allies. At 7:30 a.m., whistles blew, and the men went 'over the top'. The generals had ordered troops (carrying up to 80 pounds of equipment) to walk in straight lines across No Man's Land, advancing as though forming a military parade.

British soldiers were slaughtered, torn and ripped apart by German guns. One German machine-gunner wrote: "They went down in their hundreds. You didn't have to aim, we just fired into them." British casualties on the first day of the Battle of the Somme were 20,000 dead and 40,000 wounded—probably more casualties suffered by any army in any war on any single day.

Despite the disaster, Douglas Haig—from his headquarters in the château at Valvion, 50 miles behind the lines—remained confident. He continued to fight the war using a similar strategy of attack for four months, with the same results. Only on November 18, 1916, as winter set in, did the battle finally grind to a halt. A mere six miles of ground had been taken. The final casualties were: British 415,000, French 195,000, Germans perhaps 600,000.

Although his tactic of persisting in a battle strategy that seemed futile drew criticism, General Douglas Haig retained the title of commander-in-chief until the end of the war in 1918. In spite of the enormous casualties and costs of the battles that he initiated, he received encouragement and support from the King and a substantial part of the British populace.

The following letter written to Haig was found among his papers ([De Groot, 1988](#)):

Illustrious General, the expectation of mankind is upon you—the 'Hungry Haig' as we call you here at home. You shall report 500,000 casualties, but the Soul of the empire will afford them. And you shall break through with the cavalry of England and France for the greatest victory that history has ever known. Drive on, Illustrious General!

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## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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This anonymous note was preserved by Haig probably because it echoed his own feelings. This letter and similar messages that he received reinforced his belief that there existed a great mass of people who shared his willingness and determination to pursue victory even at the cost of the lives of hundreds of thousands of men.

The “[potlatch](#)” is a festival ceremony—practiced by indigenous peoples of the Pacific Northwest Coast—that has been studied extensively by anthropologists. The word means “to give away” or “a gift.” The potlatch served as the means by which aspiring nobles validated their status position by giving away gifts, and through the lavish Distribution—and sometimes ostentatious destruction—of resources and property.

Citing Gaston Bouthoul, [Franco Fornari](#) (1975) suggests that war represents a “voluntary destruction of previously accumulated reserves of human capital,” an act performed with the implicit intention to “sacrifice a certain number of lives.” He compares warfare to the institution of potlatch: Acts of ostentatious destruction whose aim is to “intimidate the rival and, ultimately, give prestige to the donor or destroyer.”

The proud claim made in the letter written to Haig—that the soul of the British Empire can well afford 500,000 casualties—conveys this sense of warfare as a form of potlatch or ostentatious destruction. Prestige is conveyed upon the donor or destroyer—the British Empire—by virtue of its capacity to endure or tolerate hundreds of thousands of casualties. The British Empire is so great and powerful that it can afford to throw away its own men.

The First World War may be understood as an extraordinary, monumental form of potlatch, or ostentatious destruction, as each nation strove to demonstrate its capacity and willingness to throw away or waste men and materials. The greatness and prestige of each nation would be measured according to the quantity of men and materials that could be thrown away or wasted. The First World War constituted a massive, sacrificial competition.

## VI. Warfare as Truth

Franco Fornari calls war the spectacular establishment of a general human situation whereby “death assumes absolute value.” The ideas for which we die are considered to be true, he says, because death becomes a “demonstrative process.” Willingness to die in battle shows

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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sincerity. Death in battle testifies to the truth of the ideology for which people fight.

The connection between death and truth grows out of our feeling that surely if someone goes so far as to give their life for an idea, then there must be something to this idea. We find it difficult to conceive that human beings would die for an idea possessing no validity. Surely human beings would not kill people—and allow themselves to be killed—in the name of nothing.

Dead and mangled bodies on the field of battle imply the existence of some “thing” in the name of which the frenzied activity and destruction—the carnage—has occurred, testifying to the reality of that thing. People imagine that if radical acts of destruction are taking place, then they must be occurring based on something real.

Surely if England was merely a social construction, soldiers would not allow themselves to be “scorched, blown to atoms, gassed and tortured.” Acts of destruction confer reality on the entity or idea in whose name these acts are undertaken.

British infantryman Coningsby Dawson tried to explain what British soldiers kept going in the First World War in the face of the horrors that they encountered. One motive that kept them at the front, he said, was a “sense of pride.” Yet Dawson perceived that “something else” was essential to the endurance of his British comrades:

It seems a mad thing to say with reference to fighting men, but that other thing which enables you to meet sacrifice gladly is love. It's the love that helps us to die gladly—love for our cause, our pals, our family, our country. Under the disguise of duty one has to do an awful lot of loving at the Front.

War according to Fornari symbolizes destruction put into the service of the preservation of what men love. Those who make war are driven not by hate, but by a “love need.” Men conceive of war as a “duty toward their love object.”

What is at stake in war, Fornari says, is not so much the safety of the individual as the safety of the “collective love object.” The collective love object for which men die and kill is the nation.

[Elaine Scarry](#) (1987) claims that war performs a demonstrative function. The dispute that leads to war initiates a process whereby each side calls into question the legitimacy and thereby “erodes the reality of the other country's issues, beliefs, ideas, and self-conception.”

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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Wars are undertaken as each side attempts to reassert that its own constructs are “real” and that “only the other side’s constructions are ‘creations’ (and by extension, ‘fictions,’ or ‘lies’).” In order to certify the reality of its beliefs, each side brings forward and places before its opponent’s eyes, and the eyes of its own population, “all available sources of substantiation.”

According to Scarry, the fundamental characteristic of warfare (as compared with other activities that take the form of a contest) is “injuring.” Without the requirement that some people be injured, any number of other kinds of contests could be developed in order to determine a “winner” and a “loser”.

Nations fight wars—Scarry argues, not only to determine a winner or loser, but to provide an arena in which injuries can occur. Injuries function to allow “derealized and disembodied beliefs to reconnect with the force and power of the material world.”

Wars occur, Scarry suggests, when societies or nations—responding to doubts about the validity of their basic ideologies or belief-systems—are unable to draw upon “benign forms of substantiation” to allay their anxiety about the validity of these ideologies or belief-systems.

Scarry describes injury in battle as the mining of the ultimate substance, the ultimate source of substantiation, the extraction of the physical basis of reality from its dark hiding place in the body out into the light of day.

Making available the precious ore of confirmation, the interior content of human bodies, lungs, arteries, blood, brains—the motherlode that will be reconnected to the winning issue, to which it will lend its radical substance, its compelling, heartsickening reality, until benign forms of substantiation come into being.

When a people begin to acutely doubt the truth of their society’s fundamental beliefs, leaders may initiate a war in order to put doubts to rest. Injuries, wounds and deaths suffered in battle persuade society members of the truth of their nation’s ideology. It is as if waging war generates the following line of thought: “Look, men still are willing to be mutilated and to die for our beliefs. They must be true!”

According to Scarry, the interior content of a soldier’s body—“lungs, arteries, blood and brains,” oozing into the light of day once he has been wounded in battle—constitute the “motherlode” substantiating the issue for which the war has being fought. The content of the wounded soldier’s body constitutes the precious “ore of confirmation.”

In war, Scarry says, the “incontestable reality of the body”—the body in pain, the body maimed, the body dead and hard to dispose of—is “conferred on an ideology.” The ideology thus achieves for a time the force and status of material “fact” by the “sheer weight of the multitudes of damaged and opened human bodies.” Warfare, in short, is that cultural activity that produces dead and wounded soldiers in order to establish the truth of a society’s ideology.

### VII. The Nation-State Kills Its Own Soldiers

During the Aztec period, one Mexican city-state fought other Mexican city-states—with the objective of capturing sacrificial victims that became offerings to its gods. Upon returning from one typical battle, Aztec warriors reported to their King, Moeteuzcoma, providing an account of what had transpired.

They told him that they had taken a goodly number of captives, but that 370 of their own warriors had died or been lost through capture. Moeteuzcoma replied: “Behold, brothers, how true was the word of the ancestors who taught us that the sun...feeds alike from both sides” ([Brundage](#), 1986).

Conquest—winning or losing—was one dimension of Aztec warfare. However, as Brundage observes, from the god’s point of view neither side won or lost. The god could not lose in any case. Whatever the outcome of a war, gods would be fed with the bodies and blood of sacrificial victims.

In the West, we insist that the maiming or death of soldiers (and civilians) in battle represent unfortunate by-products as we wage war in order to achieve other goals. We assume that killing and dying is undertaken in the name of real objectives. Heretofore, we have not considered the possibility that killing and dying constitute the fundamental purpose of warfare.

In our conventional way of thinking, a soldier is killed by the enemy. When French or British soldiers got out of trenches during the First World War, ran toward enemy lines and were slaughtered, we say that Germans killed them. When German soldiers got out of trenches and ran toward enemy lines, we say that they were killed by the English or French.

Wouldn’t it be more parsimonious to say that French soldiers were killed by the French nation and its leaders—who asked them to get out of trenches and run into artillery shells and machine-gun fire?

## First World War as Sacrificial Ritual

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Wouldn't it be more accurate to state that German soldiers were killed by the German nation and its leaders—who also asked their soldiers to get out of trenches and run into artillery shells and machine-gun fire? We disguise the sacrificial meaning of warfare by delegating the killing of soldiers to the enemy.

In her groundbreaking [Blood Sacrifice and the Nation](#) (1999), Carolyn Marvin suggests that our deepest secret, the “collective group taboo” is knowledge that society depends on the “death of its own members at the hands of the group.” At the behest of the group, Marvin says, the lifeblood of community members must be shed.

Marvin calls soldiers the “sacrificial class” to whom we delegate the shedding of blood. The soldier is our chosen victim. When he dies for the country, Marvin says, he dies for all of us.

[Gwynne Dyer](#) (2005) cites General John Hackett: “You offer yourself to be slain: This is the essence of being a soldier. By becoming soldiers, men agree to die when we tell them to.” [Joanna Bourke](#) observes that the most important point to be made about the male body during the First World War was that it was “intended to be mutilated.”

We represent war as a drive for conquest: an outlet for energetic, aggressive activity, even as its purpose and inevitable consequence is mutilation and death. We encourage the soldier's delusion of masculine virility and call him a hero—in order to lure him into becoming a sacrificial victim.