

VIRILITY AND SLAUGHTER

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I. Introduction

Historians estimate that during the First World War (1914-1918), 9 million soldiers were killed, 21 million wounded, and nearly 8 million taken prisoner or reported missing. Thus, of 65 million troops mobilized, nearly 38 million, or 58 percent were casualties. What was the purpose and meaning of this war? Why were millions of young men slaughtered?

Perhaps we can comprehend this case of civilizational self-destruction by examining the central strategy that guided the course of battles: that of the “offensive at all costs.” This “strategy” actually represented an ideology. Belief that it was worthwhile for soldiers to attack whenever possible (the offensive at all costs) derived from the idea that morale and discipline were the crucial factors determining success on the battlefield. A nation could achieve victory, according to this philosophy, only if troops had the courage and will to move forward relentlessly—to continue to attack even in the face of heavy casualties.

II. The First World War as Perpetual Slaughter

When I began my research on the First World War and encountered the perpetual, futile slaughter, I assumed historians were capable of accounting for what had occurred; that there must have been a logical explanation. My assumption was unfounded. Historians describe the events—report what occurred—but are unable to comprehend the war’s meaning.

Why did the killing persist for four years despite the fact that nothing was accomplished?

Jay Winter—one of the best and most prominent historians of the First World War—concludes his six-part video series ([*The Great War and the Shaping of the 20th Century*](#), 1996) in a tone of baffled bewilderment, summing up his reflections: “The war solved no problems. Its effects, both immediate and indirect, were either negative or disastrous. Morally subversive, economically destructive, socially degrading, confused in its course, futile in its result, it is the outstanding example in European history of meaningless conflict.”

Studying the battles of the First World War, one learns of the prodigious number of human beings that were killed in each of them. The mind boggles. What was going on? What kept the war going? Why did leaders persist in asking young men to get out of trenches and run into artillery shells and machine-gun fire?

Why didn't the Generals modify their battle strategy after it had become evident that what they were doing did not work? Why did soldiers rarely rebel? Why did they continue to fight on even as death stared them in the face?

The First World War began with Germany moving through Belgium to attack France, expecting a quick victory that did not occur. The French counterattack also failed. Britain joined the war to honor its treaty obligation with Belgium. Soon there was stalemate. The combatants then built 500 miles of zigzagging trenches in France. Soldiers settled in on opposing lines, sometimes separated by distances of only 100-300 yards. Which side would give in first?

The high casualty rate during this war reflected the nature of the battle strategy. “Attack” occurred when massive numbers of troops along the front line—supported by artillery fire from thousands of guns—got out of their trenches and ran into No Man's Land toward the enemy trench. Generals hoped their troops would be able to cut barbed wire, break through the opposing line, and assault enemy troops in their trenches.

Attacks were nearly always unsuccessful. Here is [Eksteins' \(1989\) description](#) of the fundamental pattern:

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."

Eksteins describes the results of the first year of fighting on the Western Front, 1914:

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. Total French losses by the end of December were comparable with the German, roughly 300,000 killed and 600,000 wounded or missing.

What did all of this killing and dying accomplish? Eksteins writes: "For over two 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."

III. Doctrine of the "Offensive at All Costs"

How may one account for the monumental, futile destructiveness that characterized the First World War? How may one explain the fact that national governments and their military leaders persisted in employing a battle strategy that continually failed while costing millions of men their lives? Perhaps

we may begin to grasp what occurred by examining the battle doctrine that guided the thinking of many British officers, as well as military leaders of other European nations.

This doctrine of the “offensive at all costs” grew out of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905 (see [Miller et al.](#), 1991; [Ter-raine](#), 1982; [Travers](#), 2014). The Japanese sent wave after wave of troops against Russian lines in the face of machine-guns. Casualties were enormous, but eventually Russian troops were overwhelmed by the persistent Japanese attacks. European officers who studied the war were impressed by the “morale and discipline” of the Japanese soldiers: their capacity or willingness to push or move forward relentlessly in spite of heavy casualties.

Thus evolved a paradigm that focused on the “psychological battlefield” as the key element of warfare. The issue, according to this doctrine, was whether troops had the courage and will to cross the fire-swept zone, suffer heavy casualties in the attack—and still keep moving forward (Travers, 2014). The doctrine of the offensive was put forth as an antidote to modern fire power.

Precisely because modern fire power made the offensive so difficult, therefore the offense had to be heavily overemphasized (Travers, 2014). This strategy was likely to be very costly in manpower in the face of modern weapons such as machine-guns. The doctrine of the offensive must take account of this—and still remain offensive.

Remarkably, it sometimes was suggested that offensive tactics actually must *aim* at heavy losses, since this was the most reliable and sure way of getting through enemy defenses (Travers, 1987). In the First World War film, [Paths of Glory](#) (1957, directed by Stanley Kubrick), the French General justifies the ruthless tactic of requiring his soldiers to attack in the face of machine-guns by explaining that soldiers on the front line of the assault “absorb bullets and shrapnel and by doing so allow other men to get through.”

Given a battle strategy guided by the philosophy of the offensive at all costs, British officers who did not encourage the offensive spirit often were removed. In 1918, General Sir Hubert Gough complained to his aide that his troops had “no

blood lust” and his officers no “spirit of the offensive.” He told his aide: “I want to shoot two officers.” The aide replied, “Beg your pardon, Sir, there are no officers under sentence.” Grough looked at him as if to say, “You fool,” and explained, “Yes, I know that, but I want to shoot two officers as an example to others.” Two officers were shot (Travers, 1987).

Officers’ fears that they could be executed or removed gave General Headquarters considerable leverage. Faced with obviously hopeless attacks, commanding officers were reluctant to complain, and felt compelled to attack regardless of circumstances (Travers, 1987). Attacks that failed with considerable casualties were given a sympathetic hearing, whereas attacks that failed with light casualties inevitably were condemned.

If a Brigadier lost a position, he might be removed—not for losing the position—but for not losing enough men in trying to hold it. General Douglas Haig castigated Division 49 for not holding Ancre in September 1916, complaining, “Total losses of this division are under a thousand!” (Travers, 1987).

IV. The Battle of the Somme

In 1916, the British felt that they had found a commander-in-chief with the courage and resolve to sustain the heavy losses that would be necessary to break through the German line. General Douglas Haig (De Groot, 1988) believed that—given an adequate supply of arms and men—victory could be achieved quickly, though not without great loss of life. The specter of massive losses did not deter him. Haig said that what was needed for victory were patriots who knew “the importance of the cause for which we were fighting.”

Whereas Germans had been impregnated from youth up with an intensely patriotic feeling—so that they “willingly die for their country”—British men could not do this unless well led. Haig believed that this simple fact had escaped the King who—during a visit to the front—seemed inclined to think that “our troops are by nature brave.”

Haig was annoyed by the fact that the King seemed to be ignorant of all the efforts commanders had to make to keep up

the morale of their men; and all the training necessary to enable a company to “go forward as a unit in the face of almost certain death.”

British strategy was set forth in a document written by General Montgomery dated April 11, 1916, which asserted that assaulting troops must “push forward at a steady pace in successive lines, each line adding fresh impetus to the preceding line.” Although two or three lines of attack *sometimes* succeed, this document asserted, four or more lines *usually* succeed (Travers, 1987).

“War,” Lieutenant General Ian Hamilton declared, is the triumph of “one will over another weaker will.” According to the theory of the offensive at all costs, victory essentially was a question of morale, belonging to the side that could cross the fire-swept zone and persist in the attack in spite of heavy casualties. Such a determined assault would unnerve the enemy, delivering a decisive moral and physical blow (Travers, 1987).

In July 1916, British forces amassed along a 30-mile front near the Somme River, hoping to achieve a breakthrough. Haig said that if you tried for a great, decisive victory, it would be necessary to get your men killed. An extraordinary artillery shelling preceded the attack. For several weeks, 100,000 shells a day were fired. It seemed impossible that German soldiers could survive such a massive barrage.

Hiding themselves deep within their trenches or bunkers, however, most did survive. When the British attacked, German soldiers rushed to their machine-gun posts and gunned down the advancing troops.

The July 1, 1916 attack on the Somme was a disaster, the worst day in British military history, with 20,000 dead and 40,000 wounded. The results of the Battle of the Somme, however, were not unlike the course of the Battle of the Loos, which took place in September and October of 1915.

Pushing through to the German line on the second day of battle, British troops crossed the road. Their numerical superiority was considerable, but several dozen German machine-guns faced them. The German regimental diary describes what happened:

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. The men stood and fired triumphantly into the mass of men advancing across open grassland. As the entire field of fire was covered with the enemy's infantry, the effect was devastating and they could be seen falling literally in hundreds.

These were not atypical results of the British strategy of the "offensive at all costs." Was the Somme campaign called off after the first few disastrous days? On the contrary, it continued for five months, with horrible scenes like those described above occurring again and again. During the second week, the British were losing 10,000 men—an entire division per day—and for the remainder of the battle the daily average was 2500 men.

V. Virility—The Battle of Verdun

Another spectacle of mass-slaughter took place in 1916 at Verdun. German General von Falkenhayn—convinced that the symbolic significance of the forts at Verdun would compel the French to defend them to the last man—told Kaiser Wilhelm that whether the forts were captured or not, French forces would "bleed to death," thus permitting Germany to emerge victorious.

General von Falkenhayn's statement—that he would cause the forces of France to bleed to death—is one of the most famous (or notorious) of the First World War, crystallizing an underlying assumption guiding this "war of attrition." The losing side in this war would be the one that ran out of men first. The war would end when one side or another had no more blood to give.

One French officer conceived of the Battle of Verdun as nothing less than a pure contest between French and German masculinity. The two races, he said, have put “all their youth into the furnace, to test which is the strongest and most virile.”

For their initial attack at Verdun, the Germans brought up 2.5 million shells, using for the purpose some 1,300 trains. By June, the artillery had grown to about 2,000 guns. It was calculated that in just over four months of battle, a million shells had been pumped into this dedicated stretch of ground, an average of 100 shells per minute.

The French action to recapture the famous Fort Douaumont employed 711 guns on a front of just over three miles. A notice in the fort today informs us that 1,000 shells were used for every square meter of the battlefield.

Verdun was captured by the Germans—then recaptured by the French—so nothing changed except that there were 650,000 more dead soldiers. When added to that of the Somme, this made a death toll in 1916 of almost a million men; an average of more than 6,600 men killed every day, more than 277 every hour, nearly five men a minute.

Imagine the pathetic plight of those on the battlefield at Verdun, confined within a narrow space that glowed like an oven for miles because of the constant artillery bombing. During battles, most soldiers barely knew what was going on, spending most of their time hiding from the incessant shelling and bombardment of rifles and machine-gun fire rather than actually fighting.

A French Lieutenant described his situation: “Nearly all of our trench has caved in. In what remains, we have scraped our niches in the walls. We huddle up in them to get at least a bit of shelter from the explosions, but we are so tightly packed that our sore limbs can’t move.”

He notes that before attacking his men were either “drunk, howling out patriotic airs, or weeping with emotion or despair.” One had the temerity to remark within earshot of the company commander: “Baa, baa, I am the sheep on the way to the slaughterhouse.”

We have noted that an officer called the battle of Verdun a test to determine which of the two races—French or German—

was the most virile. What a delusion, conceiving the behavior of soldiers in the First World War as a form of virility. What virility amounted to in practice was the capacity to endure in the face of endless, perpetual slaughter; to being willing to die when one's nation asked one to do so.

The soldier is often represented as the embodiment of active masculinity. The actual stance of the soldier at the battle of Verdun, however, was one of abject passivity.

Soldiers during the First World War—those of every nation—were expected to obey their officers and do their duty without shirking; to offer no resistance when they were ordered to put their bodies onto the battlefield to face mutilation and death.

The “strength” of a soldier amounted to his willingness to submit to the leadership absolutely, and resign entirely to his fate. To be virile, in short, was to offer no resistance when one was put forward as a sacrificial victim.

VI. The Sacred Ideal

Gwynne Dyer in his classic study [War](#) (2005) cites General John Winthrop Hacket: “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 in [Dismembering the Male](#) (1996) observes that the most important point to be made about the male body during the Great War is that it was “intended to be mutilated.” She notes that there was “no limit to the danger to which the male body could be subjected. Gunfire cut bodies in half.” In war, male bodies are turned over to the nation-state, and military leaders use these bodies as they see fit.

Why are the state and its military leaders allowed to take control of the bodies of soldiers? What justifies the mutilation and destruction of the male body? Underlying everything that occurs is the sacred ideal: one's country or nation.

The destruction of the male body in the First World War occurred in the name of entities or objects given names such as France, Germany, Great Britain, Russia, Italy, etc. These objects

required or justified abject submission.

In a lecture that formed an important part of their training ([Kerr](#), 1993), Colonel Shirley told British officers that the words that he was about to speak would be among the most “serious you will ever hear in all your lives.” Now that you have entered upon the service of your Country, Colonel Shirley said, you must proceed to “serve her with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.”

He consoled his officers by telling them that if they have done their best and yet must fall, they might take comfort in the thought they will have suffered for a cause “greater and nobler than that for which any man has ever yet sacrificed his all.”

Patriotic rhetoric resonated. One million volunteers joined the British army in the first year of the war. War Office recruiting stands were inundated with men persuaded of their duty to fight. On September 9, 1915, Basil Hart wrote to his parents asking them not to wear mourning clothes in the event of his death: “I do not wish you to regard my death as an occasion for grief, but of one for thanksgiving, for no man could desire a nobler end than to die for his country and the cause of civilization.”

Eight months of battle did not alter these noble sentiments. On May 27, 1916, Hart appended the following words to his will: “Also I wish to say that while I feel it an honor to die for England, I feel it an even greater honor to die as an officer of the British Regular Army—many of the finest gentlemen whom God has sent into this world.”

Similar sentiments of commitment and devotion were common among soldiers of all nations. Shortly before his death, Frenchman Robert Dubarle wrote of the glorious privilege of “sacrificing oneself, voluntarily. Let us try, without complaining too much, to offer our sacrifice to our country and to place the love of fatherland above our own grief.”

Willingness to join the military in the First World War—to enter battle and if necessary to die—was the way in which one demonstrated one’s devotion to the sacred ideal, one’s nation. To fight for one’s nation—risking bodily mutilation and death—represented a pledge of allegiance in its most radical

form.

A reporter described his encounter with a Canadian soldier who had been wounded in battle, but survived:

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 to your home, you need not tell them that you love your country—just show them your scars."

In Great Britain, according to Bourke, soldiers' mutilations were spoken of in public rhetoric as badges of courage: hallmark of their glorious service, and proof of patriotism. The wounded or disabled soldier was "not less but more of a man." According to the *London Times*, next to the loss of life, the "sacrifice of a limb is the greatest sacrifice a man can make for his country."

The virtue of surrendering a body part to one's nation was expressed in a song entitled "England's Broken Dolls" that was popular during the war (Bourke, 1996):

A man and maiden met a month ago.
She said, "There's one thing I should like to know
Why aren't you in khaki or navy blue?
And fighting for your country like other men do?
The man looked up and slowly shook his head
Dear Madam, do you know what you have said.
For I gladly took my chance.
Now my right arm's out in France.

VII. Virility and Slaughter

I've provided accounts of how British soldiers were torn apart by machine-gun fire as they moved forward to attack the opposing enemy trench. In the following report, British Brigadier General Rees describes a battle in which his own brigade was massacred as they advanced on German lines:

They advanced in line after line, dressed as if on parade and not a man shirked going through the extremely heavy barrage, or facing the machine-gun and rifle fire that finally wiped them out.

I saw the lines, which advanced in such admirable order melting away under fire. Yet not a man wavered, broke the ranks, or attempted to come back.

I have never seen, indeed could never have imagined such a magnificent display of gallantry, discipline and determination. The reports from the very few survivors of this marvelous advance bear out what I saw with my own eyes: that hardly a man of ours got to the German Front line.

In spite of the total failure of this attack, it is evident that General Rees regarded the destruction of his brigade in a positive light (Travers, 1987). He observes that not a man “shirked” in the face of the machine-gun and rifle fire that wiped them out. He is proud of the fact that even though his troops were “melting away under fire,” they continued to advance “in admirable order.”

In the face of the barrage of bullets, his men did not waver, break ranks, or attempt to come back. The General gushes that he had never seen such a magnificent display of “gallantry, discipline and determination.” Although his soldiers were slaughtered and “hardly a man of ours got to the German Front line,” he characterizes the advance as “marvelous.”

The General does not evaluate the battle from the perspective of success or failure. Rather, his observations are based on judgments regarding the morale and spirit demonstrated by his troops. The fact that his soldiers continued to advance in spite of being riddled with bullets leads General Rees to conclude that the attack had been “marvelous.”

The General responded positively to the slaughter of his men—because he viewed their behavior as a testimony to the depth of their devotion to their nation. By virtue of the fact that they did not shirk but continued to advance in the face of ma-

chine-gun fire, his troops demonstrated that they were absolutely committed to the ideals of Great Britain, the British Empire and its leaders. Willingness to walk into machine-gun fire represented definitive proof that his soldiers loved their country.

Soldiers during the First World War were required to adopt a posture of absolute submission to their nation and its leaders—obedience unto death. Conscientious objectors in Britain during the war were disenfranchised. Some thought that soldiers who had not seen overseas service should have the right to vote taken away from them. In the First World War, the social consensus was that bodies of soldiers belonged to the nation-state. The nation could use these bodies as it saw fit.

War requires that soldiers hand themselves over to the nation-state. In order to encourage men to allow the state to use their bodies, the soldier's role is described in positive terms with words such as honor, duty, masculinity and virility. In the First World War, however, to be honorable, masculine and virile—willing to do one's duty—was equivalent to entering a situation where there was substantial probability that one would be slaughtered.

One demonstrated one's virility by getting out of a trench and walking into artillery bombardment and Machine-gun fire. Such is the paradox of war: That goodness or morality requires a posture of abject submission; that love of country requires self-destruction; that willingness to die constitutes the highest form of virtue.