

## *Whalen, Robert — Bitter Wounds*

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Whalen, Robert Weldon (1984). *Bitter Wounds: German Victims of the Great War, 1914-1939*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

23—An image from the first weeks of the Great War: a locomotive, that roaring, clanging symbol of the industrial world, rushing across Germany. Aboard the train, hundreds of young men in new field-grey uniforms, gaily singing. One song they always sang that summer was “Die Wacht am Rhein,” full of waving banners, clashing swords, and heavenly heroes.

26—War, then, became mysterious, rationally inexplicable; it was not the result of political calculation or miscalculation, but was a defense of the community from the dragon. Politics became poetry. Thus, Alfred Biese could write in 1916: “Never before had the God of War, the greatest poet of life, created such a mighty heroic-poem like the one we experience now with throbbing hearts.” The self-sacrifice required of the hero might involve the sacrifice of his own life. This, however, was nothing to be feared, for it was proof of heroism. Self-immolation was the highest form of self-affirmation.

The religious overtones of this ideal are important. In late-nineteenth-century Germany, nation, God, father and monarch merged in the heroic metaphor.

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To young men in 1914, ancient heroes/God/the nation/the monarch looked down at them and judged them. The way to placate the “heavenly heroes” was to become like them. In his 1931 novel, *Reinhold im Dienst*, Paul Alverdes writes that to the story’s naïve protagonist, God and nation seem to be one. The ultimate consequence of the pervasive heroic metaphor was that religious and idealistic motives were harnessed to the aims of the state. Rushing off to war was an act of love.

This was a defensive war; the Emperor himself had said so. In a decree naming August 5, 1914, a day of national prayer, Wilhelm explained the cause of the war: ‘In defense against a totally unjustified attack, I have been forced to draw the sword....With a pure conscience concerning the cause of this war, I am certain of the justice of our cause before God. The defense of the Fatherland, forced on us by the enemy challenge, will demand hard sacrifices of blood and treasure. But I know that my people will stand by me with the same loyalty, unity, self-sacrifice and determination with which they stood by my Grandfather, now asleep in God, in earlier difficult days.’ This was not cynical propaganda. It was a fully coherent explanation of the war within the context of the heroic metaphor.

27—The war was a defensive war, and it was waged by “pious youth,” not killers. Allied stories about German atrocities had to be contrived, as in fact many were, because from the German perspective they were impossible. Heroes did not commit atrocities. Heroes lived nobly; they died bravely. Langemarck, site of the “Slaughter of the Innocents,” where scores of boys were killed in 1914 with

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patriotic songs on their lips, became a staple of wartime propaganda; it proved the nobility, the self-sacrifice, and the heroism of German youth.

The war was defensive, Germany's soldiers were pure, and (a third implication of "Die Wacht am Rhein") death was not in vain. The death of the hero was tied to the life of the nation, and because the nation was saved, the dead hero lived too. Death could be borne because it was not really death. "Reich wie an Wasser deine Flut, ist Deutschland Reich an Heldenblut" (as you are rich in water, Germany is rich with heroes' blood), and heroes' blood would save the nation. The last line of Heinrich Lersch's popular poem, "Soldaten Abschied," a line that appeared on countless monuments after the war, stressed this voluntary self-immolation: "Deutschland muss leben, auch wenn wir sterben müssen" (Germany must live, even if we must die). According to Leo Sternberg's "Heldenblut," rivers of heroes' blood would flow homeward and revitalize the nation.

31—The constant appeal to patriotic unity reflected a continual dread of division. The pervasive sense of antagonism was the root of a profound anxiety and produced a longing for a unity that would finally abolish contradiction

The explosion of joy which greeted the outbreak of war in 1914 was largely the result of the conviction that at last division had been overcome. The Emperor's vow, "I know no political parties, I know only Germans," quickly became the most famous remark the loquacious Wilhelm ever made. Capitalist and worker, Jew and Christian, officer and enlisted man embraced in common purpose. At long last, concord had overcome *Zerrissenheit*. Or so it seemed.

The heroic metaphor played an important role in these emotions. Everyone was called to be a hero, and anyone could be, for the essence of the heroic was the surrender of "narrow," "partisan" interests in the name

32—of the common good. Self-abnegation, Werner Sombart constantly stressed, was the heart of the heroic.

The fracturing of the heroic metaphor was both symptom and cause of the disintegration of wartime unity. Suffering was not equal; many suffered, a few did not. Farmers angrily resisted forced confiscation of their products, and workers demanded an end to inflation, shortages, and poor housing. Soldiers grew suspicious of civilians. The sutures that had closed the old wounds burst asunder and by 1917 as confidential reports on home-front morale make clear, the country seemed to have disintegrated into a score of warring camps.

Alis Salomon, a social worker, warned in 1916: "If at least an external equality in suffering is not created, if those who have given up their best and dearest are not given at least a sense of the unity and fraternity of the entire nation—then the war will leave behind a heritage of bitterness and strife (*Zerrissenheit*).

37—“Lieb Vaterland, magst ruhig sein, / Fest steht und treu, die Wacht am Rhien.” I think I shall hear these words ring in my ears to my dying day. The whole life in the Germany of today seems to move to the rhythm of this tune. Every day troops pass by my window on their way to the station and as they march along to this refrain, people rush to the windows and doors of the houses and take up the song so that it rings through the streets, almost like a solemn vow sung by these men on their way to death.

—Evelyn, Princess Blücher,  
*An English Wife in Berlin*

After the war, a vast amount of war victims' energy was directed toward comprehending what death had done to them, toward enclosing the experience of violence and death in some sort of symbolic system.

38—The Great War lasted fifty-two and a half months. Roughly 9,500,000 soldiers, from all nations, were killed, which comes to about 181,000 deaths per month, or about 6302 deaths every twenty-four hours.

40—About 4,300,000 were wounded but survived. Missing or prisoner: 974,977.

40—The dead made up about 15.4 percent of all men mobilized, and about 19.4 percent of all the men who had served at one time or another in the field army. Of some 15.6 million males born between 1870 and 1899, about 13 percent died in the fifty-two and a half months of the Great War. On the average, 465,600 German soldiers died each year of the war.

41—It is obvious, but very important, that all these dead were young and male. Combat and violent death were almost exclusively a young-male experience. Between 1870 and 1899, about 16 million boys were born; all but a few served in the military, and some 13 percent were killed.

41-2—A 1917 army survey had implied that Jewish Germans were not really sacrificing for the Fatherland. After the war, the Jewish veterans group, the *Reichsbund jüdischer Frontsoldaten*, was determined to demonstrate the extent of Jewish German Patriotism. The Reichsbund carefully collected the names of dead Jewish soldiers and proved that over 12,000 Jewish German....

42— Small arms, specifically massed rifle fire, had been the greatest killer in previous wars. In the Franco-Prussian War, 91.6 percent of casualties among German soldiers were caused by infantry rifle fire, and only 8.4 percent by artillery. This ratio changed drastically in the Great War, despite the introduction of the machine gun. According to autopsy reports, 58.3 percent of deaths were

caused by artillery, and 41.7 percent by small arms. Artillery fire reached great intensity during the war.

For example, between 24 and 29 June 1916, some 50,000 English gunners (a force the same size as Wellington's entire army at Waterloo) fired 1,500,000 rounds into German positions near the Somme, positions measuring about 14 miles by 1 mile. One million shells were light, anti-personnel explosives. The remaining half-million shells ranged from 35-pounders fired by 4.5-inch howitzers, to 1,400-pounders fired by 15-inch howitzers. These half-million shells alone comprised some 12,000 tons of steel and explosive.

Another characteristic of artillery fire was its total impersonality. In previous wars, gunners had to see a target to shoot at it, which meant that the target could shoot back. By 1914, guns could be placed several kilometers behind the front, and gunners fired not at men, but at map coordinates. The gunner never saw the men he was firing on, and the men being killed did not know where the guns were that were killing them.

## II

The heroic metaphor provided a meaning for the killing. A dead hero was not simply flung into a pit but was solemnly buried among his comrades after an elaborate ritual. A hero was not torn into raw flesh and did not scream like an animal. He died neatly and usually had time to utter a last noble phrase. The dying hero was a staple of home-front propaganda, and some war literature, such as that of Walter Flex, reflects a decent and inspiring death. But it was hard to find such a death as the war went on.

Ernst Jünger, who served throughout the war as a front-line officer, was wounded a score of times and received many decorations. He was a prolific writer and wrote obsessively about his war experience. This is the way he described the dead.

... what good does it do to cover them with sand or lime, or to throw a tent-half over them, in order to escape their black, bloated faces. There were too many. Everywhere, shovels struck something buried. All the secrets of the grave lay open in a grotesquerie worse than the most lunatic dream. Hair fell in clumps from skulls like rotting leaves from autumn trees.

Some decayed into a green fish-flesh, which gleamed at night through the torn uniforms. If you stepped on one of these, you left behind phosphorous foot-prints. Others dried into lime-covered mummies. Elsewhere, flesh fell from bones like a reddish-brown gelatin.

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In humid nights, the swollen cadavers awoke to a ghastly life, as gas, sputtering and whispering, escaped from the wounds. The worst was the bubbling mass of countless worms which oozed from the corpses.

Masses of worms oozing from cadavers is not a heroic image, yet it is representative of the imagery in the war literature.

54—The wounded man's first stop was the battalion aid-station, located near enough to the front to provide emergency service but far enough back to be out of the range of small arms. The first selection occurred here. Men with minor wounds were treated and sent back to their units. Dying men were set aside to die. Men with serious injuries were given emergency care, tagged, and prepared for shipment to the rear. The wounded "all have a tag on their chest, like a crate being shipped on the railroad. On the tag is confirmation from the aid-station that the person has been wounded, is being transferred to a field hospital...and that he has received a tetanus shot. The tag must be signed by a medical officer."

Behind the aid-station, the medical system extended through the rear area and to nearly every town and village at home. Field hospitals were attached to divisions, larger hospitals were controlled by rear area commanders, and hospitals at home were under the command of deputy commanding generals. At home too were many special hospitals, such as Dr. Silex's School for the Blind in Berlin, Dr. Kraepelin's psychiatric hospital in Munich, and the Düsseldorf Clinic for facial wounds.

Through this complex system, the injured man was shipped, examined, tagged, loaded on to hospital trains and unloaded into ambulances, all the while unconscious or semi-conscious, and in every case, unable to control what was happening to him. Others made the decisions. His uniform was replaced by a hospital gown. Mysterious terms were inscribed on the bit of blackboard above his bed. What to eat and when to defecate, when to get up and when to lie down, were all controlled by benevolent but alien forces. He was wheeled here, shipped there, bandaged and unbandaged, dressed and undressed, cut open and sewn back together, and through it all, he was, unavoidably, an object. Only gradually was the wounded man able to assert himself again.

### III

The first major transports of wounded reached Germany in the fall and winter of 1914; subsequently, trainloads of sick and wounded arrived daily. Meeting the trains became an important activity for civilians. As the men were unloaded from the trains, crowds stood around them and gawked.

95—"You can be sure of the thanks of the Fatherland!"  
—Government slogan

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In the winter of 1914/15, the trains that had carried singing heroes to battle the summer before, returned home bearing a cargo of broken men. The longer the war went on, the longer the trains became; for Leonard Frank, the hospital train was the central metaphor of the war because it brought the frightfulness of the war home.

Soldiers were killed and wounded so quickly that it was difficult for the government to keep track of the casualties. Casualty lists were published almost every day, but it was forbidden to publish running totals of casualties, and the government was never sure what the precise statistics were. Figures published the war, however, demonstrate the war victims' population explosion.

According to the official Army Medical Report, the estimated numbers of cases treated during the war were:

	<i>Wounded</i>	<i>Diseased</i>	<i>Total</i>
1914/15	1,579,023	4,513,215	6,092,238
1915/16	1,398,281	5,706,370	7,104,651
1916/17	1,303,322	5,491,044	6,794,366
1917/18	1,406,311	5,787,674	7,193,985

Dr. Schjerning wrote that about 90 percent, or 24.3 million, of the cases treated resulted in the soldier's returning to duty, leaving some 2.7 million with some kind of permanent disability.

In 1923, before any census of war victims was completed, the Labor Ministry estimated that dead soldiers were survived by about 533,000 widows and 1,192,000 orphans. The German welfare state, unable to cope with this vast number of people, underwent profound changes between 1914 and 1918.

181—On Sunday, July 30, 1930, the Reichsverband held its fifth annual convention in Berlin. Willibald Hanner, a disabled veteran and school teacher from Plauen, in Saxony, delivered the opening address. He talked about the Great War: "Everyone here experienced it differently, but everyone sensed the demonic quality of the war. It was like some elemental catastrophe, I don't know how else to say it, which threw the entire planet into torment.

We know & feel, that the war didn't only have external effects. It did not just change the map of the world, it changed the soul of human beings. We ourselves cannot entirely sense the enormous impact of the war on the human spirit, because we were part of it...we who have lived through this inferno can never be free from it.

182—It has affected all our lives. That is why we have gathered here. A gash goes through all our lives, and that gash is the war. With a brutal hand, it has torn our lives in two.

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188—The army, like all armies, rigidly reduced the scope of autonomous action. Remarque wrote in *All Quiet on the Western Front*,

**With our young, wide-awake eyes, we saw that the classical idea of “Fatherland” which our teachers held, here in amounted to a surrender of the personality, a surrender which even the meanest servant would never be required to make....We were trained for heroism like circus ponies.**

**The Army also encouraged infantilism. It was one of the chief characteristics of the front soldier. Like children, soldiers were totally subordinate to the will of their superior, and took a childish delight in simple physical pleasures, like warmth and food. The soldier-child was not an autonomous, responsible adult, but a passive and helpless waif.**

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