The Devastation of the Psyche through War

Napoleon once said that “A soldier will fight long and hard for a piece of colored ribbon.” This may have been true in Napoleon’s time, when an inspiring general was able to tip the scales by fueling his troops with the fire of nationalism. However, in the wasteland depicted in Erich Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front, such a romantic idea is not nearly enough to repress the chaotic reality of war. World War I, which began in July of 1914 , took place directly after a massive second wave of industrialization, which emerged in the 1870’s. Men of all nations entered the war, each believing themselves the mighty youth of an invincible homeland. Most of these men would never face one another directly, as machine guns, artillery shells, and trenches had stripped war of almost all personal combat, lending to its dehumanizing nature. Being caught unprepared for a split second, even in one’s own trench or bunker, could result in being blown to oblivion, or a bullet to the skull. Despite the extreme danger, young able-bodied men were pressured to volunteer by older generations, who urged them to go off and fulfill their *duty* to their country. Paul, the protagonist and narrator of Ramarque’s book, was one of these men. Having enlisted with his friends at the urging of his schoolmaster, Kantorek, Paul and his friends set off, where “no one had the vaguest idea what we were in for... those who were better off... were beside themselves with joy.”[[1]](#footnote-0). Naivety and inexperience would not shelter these men for long, as the gruesome reality of war would soon strip these away. Remarque’s novel, while fiction, offers a particular insight into this mental process, as he once occupied Paul’s position himself. As they were assimilated into the war machine under the guise of nationalism, the men who faced the new, industrial horrors of war were robbed of their humanity, whether or not they left the battlefield alive.

Getting young men to enlist for certain death wasn’t necessarily easy. Propaganda offered one solution, sweeping the streets as governments attempted to coerce the once-enthusiastic populations into supporting the war. This marked the first occasion where governments themselves applied this pressure directly to their populations.[[2]](#footnote-1) However, those in power were able to capitalize more heavily upon the influence of nationalism. Many of the world’s powers had spent the last several years claiming chunks of Africa for themselves, crushing many an uprising or resistance along the way. This domination of Africa, which was a one-sided battle due to the extreme superiority of European technology, caused each of these nations to develop an inappropriate sense of invincibility. While this unfounded nationalism may have been enough to cajole recruits at the beginning of the war, it quickly disintegrated into nothingness on the front lines, where it offered them no protection from the unceasing hellfire that rained upon them. Paul and his friends, like many others, felt cheated or deceived as the hollow ideal of nationalism buckled beneath reality, realizing that they were sent to the front as a senseless show of force. Throughout the novel, the cheapness of a soldier’s life is underscored, an idea backed by the countless “wastage” deaths that are inflicted daily. These tolls totalled nearly a thousand for each side, all accidental or unnecessary deaths that were caused by faulty machinery, the wretched living conditions, or being exposed at the wrong moment.[[3]](#footnote-2) While nationalism may have once been a deciding factor in the battles of world powers, it failed to provide the kind of edge and inspiration that it did in previous generations. The technology of industrialization had rendered it obsolete, and taken it’s place. Men sat behind machine guns, cowered in bunkers, or clung to life in the dismal trenches, all without ever having to see the enemy.

Though it may not have been the most tangible of resources, part of the reason nationalism was such a convincing tool was because many of these men had very little to identify with, or stand for. Most who joined the army were quite young, especially during the end of the war, when there were few *men* left to fight. As such, they had hardly begun to live at all - World War I was the first great event in their lives and they believed in it, at first. They had no families to go home to, no work to long for, and eventually no pride in the countries that they risked their lives for. They never had a chance to develop an identity or a selfhood; the colossal impact of war engulfed their young, bare minds, becoming all that they knew. These men would become known as the “lost generation”, lacking societal, cultural, and emotional niches following the war (if they returned at all.) In addition, conditions such as PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) affected the ex-soldiers, as even a car engine backfiring or a firecracker exploding could awaken the fear once instilled by bombardment. Soldiers who escaped physical death on the battlefield were still forced to cope with mental illnesses, social and cultural ostracization, and the dreadful memories of their comrades dying.

Surrounded by misery in the throes of this unnatural combat, all that these men had were each other. This made it all the more debilitating to witness the death of a comrade, which happened often. At the end of All Quiet on the Western Front, Paul is the final surviving member of his classmates, before he dies that is. Even when he is on leave to visit his family, Paul finds it impossible to relay to his mother and father the terrifying experiences he has had to endure. Grief, depression, and distress had no place on the battlefield. These intense sensations, which require time and support to handle on their own, had to be swallowed down if one was to remain on-edge and survive The constant state of attack left no time for the men to feel, as survival took every bit of mental capacity. Their psyches were simply forced to endure far too much emotional stress and bloodshed to remain healthy. The doctor of the camp refuses to amputate the dying Kemmerich’s leg, as he has already witnessed sixteen deaths that day. Like the soldiers, the doctor struggles to perform his duty - one cannot casually shake off death’s overwhelming presence. This constant yielding of emotion and thought to instinct was not necessarily good. Paul encounters a French soldier when hiding in a crater left by an explosion, and stabs the man purely in reaction. After doing so he empathizes with the dying man, but in his own words, “Terror can be endured so long as a man simply ducks; but it kills, if a man thinks about it.” (138). Like all other emotional aspects of war, Paul must repress his dark act if he is to make it another day.

Men of all nationalities were forced to endure the abysmal conditions of the war, and to kill those with whom they had no quarrel, all for the so-called glory of the nation. As this nationalism dissipated, the soldiers realized that they had more in common with the men whom they were trying to kill than they did with their superior officers. Utterly overwhelmed on the front, emotionally and physically, these men do not only abandon the ideals once drilled into them by these officers, but align themselves against them. As an Austrian soldier named Karl explained to his mother, “My ideas are neither anarchistic or nihilistic. I am a communist... how is it possible to be anything else?”[[4]](#footnote-3). The human psyche can only endure so much death, gore, and loss, especially when faced with the realization that their efforts are not only pointless, but foundationless. Thousands of soldiers witnessed their friends die, all for a bit of colored ribbon. To these men, who buried their emotions in order to survive, death eventually would be seen as a relieving embrace instead of an ominous end. Paul’s own fate at the end of the novel suggests this idea this in a light that provides some solace and closure, “His face had an expression of calm, as though almost glad the end had come” (296) Just on the page before, he declares that he will live boldly in the face of the strange, alienating world that waits for him after the war. Though fiction, Remarque’s experience of war allowed All Quiet on the Western Front to suggests the very real idea that, while death may have been carefully avoided death on the battlefield, it can ultimately prove a better fate than attempting to re-assimilate one’s self after enduring such psychological damage.

1. Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front* (Ballantine edition: 1987, orig 1929) [↑](#footnote-ref-0)
2. Ciarlo, David. “Revolution in Russia, 1917.” Western Civilization II, 1020. University of Colorado. Boulder. 4/2/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
3. Ciarlo, David. “World War I.” Western Civilization II, 1020, University of Colorado. Boulder. 3/28/2013 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
4. excerpt from *German Students’ War Letters*, transl. A. F. Wedd (New York 1929), pp 208-209 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)