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“They wouldn’t end it with any of us alive, now would they?”: The First World War in Cold War Era Films

“Yes, the French are in it, and all them little countries. Austria, Hungary, Belgium, Spain.”

Charlie Allnut in *The African Queen*, 1951

In 2007 *Military History Magazine* published a “Special Collector’s Edition” on what the editors considered the “100 Greatest War Movies” (*100 Greatest War Movies*). Featuring a self-assured looking Tom Hanks in *Saving Private Ryan* on its cover, which also promised inside information on “*Das Boot*, *Glory*, *Patton*, *M*A*S*H**, *Napoleon*, *Zulu*, *Gettysburg*, *Open City*, *The Longest Day*” etc., this special issue seemed to conform to what one would expect from an American military history buff publication: excitement, terror, gore, glory, heroism and, incidentally, a satiric or even war-critical moment. Yet, the two top movies on the list turned out to be *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1930) and *Paths of Glory* (1957), famous First World War films that have proven instrumental in establishing that conflict as the exact opposite of excitement, glory and heroism. These films’ impressive battlefield scenes undoubtedly contributed to their status as classics of the genre, but they seem to have influenced our very idea of what war is on a more fundamental level. Today, unqualified jingoism is hardly ever, if at all, a part of respected war films. Even those films that celebrate a specific war accomplishment, like *Gallipoli* about the ‘birth’ of the Anzac Spirit or, indeed, *Saving Private Ryan*, which has been interpreted convincingly as an example of American post-Cold War triumphalism (cf. Auster), never fail to emphasize the physical and moral price that was paid. In that respect ‘the war to end all wars’ seems to have set the standard for the way warfare is portrayed.

Nevertheless, it seems safe to say that to most Western audiences war film in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s referred to pictures about the Second World War. Filmmakers in the United States as well as Eastern,

Central and Western Europe grew ever more obsessed with that conflict during these decades, foregrounding the martyrdom of resistance fighters in occupied countries, the heroism of Allied forces that brought about the final victory over the Axis powers, and the horror of the Holocaust as the ultimate proof that this was a 'just war.' While the Second World War reminded audiences of the *just* price one ought to be willing to pay when it came to *just* causes, the First World War seems to have accommodated everyone's pacifist conscience and maybe even utopian dreams during the Cold War era. Despite the huge commercial and critical success of *M*A*S*H** (1970) the Korean war never became a staple in the film industry and Vietnam only did so after that war had finished (*Coming Home*, *The Boys in Company C* and *The Deer Hunter* all date from 1978, *Apocalypse Now* was released in August of 1979).²⁰⁹

In countries like France, Italy, Britain and Belgium the First World War remained the *Great War*, but – increasingly – it also became *that other war*, a conflict more distant and therefore less likely to evoke memories as intense and livid as World War Two. This does not imply, as David Lescot and Laurent Véray seem to suggest, that the memory of the First World War is not charged with conflicts and dissent.²¹⁰ Despite the ubiquity of mud, trenches, shell holes and mass slaughter in First World War films from every era and place, it does matter when and where these films were shot. Local political and cultural sensitivities, as well as geopolitical convolutions and constraints, have played a significant role in the production, distribution, and reception of WWI films. An almost systematic disregard for artistic practices beyond the United Kingdom, the United States, France, Germany and Italy in First World War cultural studies, however, has tended to obscure this.²¹¹ To study classic WWI films like *Paths of Glory* (1957), *King and Country* (1964) and *Uomini contro* (1970) alongside examples from Bulgaria (*The Peach Thief*, 1964), Romania (*Forest of the Hanged*, 1965), and Poland (*Austeria*, 1982; *Pismak*, 1985; *H. M. Deserters*, 1986), not only brings the often neglected Eastern and Balkan fronts into the picture, it also opens up perspectives on themes that are rarely discussed in this context, most importantly ethnic versus imperial nationalism and the plight of the Jews – which tied in with two very prominent themes during the Cold War, postcolonialism and the Holocaust.

1 Waves of First World War Films

First World War films tend to come in waves.²¹² After the dozens of films

released immediately following the war, the next series of major films was produced in the thirties, signaling that Western societies were finally ready to face and debate the war (Sorlin, "Cinema and the Memory" 18). Another series of European films arrived around the fiftieth anniversary of the war: full-length WWI-movies were released both by Western European countries involved in the conflict on the Allied side: *King and Country* (1966), *Thomas l'imposteur* (1965), *L'Horizon* (1967), *The Blue Max* (1966), *Le Roi de Coeur* (1966) and by Eastern European states that had supported the Central Powers (*The Peach Thief*) or the Allies (*Forest of the Hanged*), whereas Sweden saw the production of two films dealing briefly with the effects of the war on this neutral country – Mai Zetterling's *Älskande par* (*Loving Couples*, 1964) and Jan Troell's *Här har du ditt liv* (*This Is Your Life*, 1966). One of the most successful films of the postwar era, *Doctor Zhivago* (1965), does not deal primarily with the Great War, but it does feature very interesting scenes about it.

The biggest wave of First World War films arrived only a few years later, from 1969 to 1972, during the height of the anti-Vietnam movement and the rise of the New Left, though only a few of these films (*Johnny Got his Gun*, 1971, and *Uomini contro*, to some extent also *Oh! What a Lovely War*, 1969, and *Louisa, een woord van liefde*, 1972) can be seen directly in that light.²¹³ It is hard to evaluate Sorlin's suggestion that the arrival of these films in a group around 1970 signals that there finally was a window, an opportunity "to look back at the conflict which had opened the century" ("Cinema and the Memory" 23) in between the fifteen years of immediate WWII-obsession and the later series of Vietnam films beginning in the late 1970s. For one, Vietnam films really were an American business only, and apart from Dalton Trumbo's pet project *Johnny Got His Gun* American studios and directors did not make films about the American involvement in the First World War in the late 1960s and early 1970s.²¹⁴ It was mainly French, Belgian, British and Italian directors who chose the Great War as the setting or topic for ruminations about state sanctioned violence and loss.

2 Neither Heroes Nor Foes

The forms of adventure and heroism that have always been central to World War II films rarely feature in their World War I counterparts. Only films about air warfare tend to depict combat in chivalric terms – like *The Blue Max*, *Zeppelin* (1971) and *Von Richthofen and Brown* – and, intriguingly, they are also the only ones having German main characters,

often portrayed with sympathy and respect.²¹⁵ But even in these cases the conflict itself is framed as a cruel and absurd endeavor organized by sadistic military leaders, as in this telling remark by Canadian ace pilot Brown in *Von Richthofen and Brown*, when a journalist with the *Toronto Star* suggests the war might soon be over: "How can it be over? There's still some of us alive. They wouldn't end it with any of us alive, now would they?" The happy ending of *Zeppelin* consists of the bicultural English/German hero arriving in neutral Holland, enabling him to wait for the end of the war in peace. It is hard to imagine similar quotes or plot twists in adventure films about the American Civil War or the Second World War. The Great War, it seems, has become the war where the real enemies are the war itself and the leaders waging it. The official enemy of the jingoist war-time propaganda (e.g. 'The Hun') is conspicuously absent. This might also help explain why post-WWII Hollywood never showed a real interest in the Great War: it did not fit its Manichean tradition.

The First World War as a conflict where the soldiers of belligerent armies were not enemies but fellow-victims of the carnage is a premise of most Western European and American WWI films since *All Quiet on the Western Front*: whether they are German or French or British troops, the soldiers are all scared, overwhelmed and essentially innocent. There are exceptions to this theme, of course, particularly in World War II-era films like *The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp* (1943), where the German brutality theme of 1914–1918 propaganda is taken up again, often rephrased to apply to (or tune in with) contemporary Nazi acts of violence. After 1945, this 'All Soldiers of the Great War Were Victims' theme returned with a remarkable twist. From *Paths of Glory* onwards the enemy was no longer to be found on the other side of No Man's Land, but high and dry at the often opulent tables of the own High Command. There are

no *Platoon*-like condemnations of atrocities by common soldiers or junior officers (neither Entente nor Central) in these First World War films.²¹⁶ Only high commanders seem to have committed war-crimes against their own men. The most extreme indictment in this respect is surely Francesco Rosi's *Uomini contro*, where the Italian Army's main occupation seems to be butchering its own soldiers. The Austrian enemy is out there as well, of course, killing Italians with artillery and snipers but it seems hardly as brutal as the utterly vindictive, die-hard General Leone, who orders supposedly morale-boosting decimations and executions of his own troops for all sorts of offenses, from what could be labeled innocent mistakes or misjudgments of a given military situation up to acts of cowardice, insubordination, mutiny and desertion. This point is emphasized most emphatically in a scene where scores of Italian soldiers are mowed down

in an open field and the Austrians themselves ask them to return to their trenches ("We can't keep killing like that. Go back!").^{[217](#)}

3 Desertion as Pars Pro Toto

The theme that dominates post-1945 films depicting the First World War is desertion. In reality, despite the horrendous circumstances in which soldiers had to live, desertion was a rare phenomenon during the First World War and the number of executed soldiers was relatively low,^{[218](#)} which suggests that painting a representative picture of life in the trenches was not the film directors' main concern in this respect. From *Paths of Glory* to *Blanche Maupas* (2009), the plight of those soldiers too shell-shocked, numbed or appalled to fight on, only to be brutalized and eventually shot by their own military seems to have become directors' preferred pars pro toto to demonstrate this conflict's quintessential cruelty and injustice. Films featuring scenes about desertion or executions include *A Farewell to Arms* (1957 version), *La Grande Guerra* (1959), *Der brave Soldat Schwejk* (1960), *King and Country*, *Forest of the Hanged*, *Le Roi de Coeur*, *L'Horizon*, *Uomini contro*, the "Joining Up" episode of Ken Loach's *Days of Hope* (1975), *Pismak*, *H. M. Deserters*, *Capitaine Conan*, *Le Pantalon* (1997), *Un long dimanche de fiançailles* and *Les Fragments d'Antonin* (2006). In this long series of films, one not at all central to the canon of WWI films stands out because it is the only film in which the deserters seem to win out in the end: *Doctor Zhivago*. This is how this scene is narrated, mainly in voice-over, by Dr. Zhivago's half-brother, a Soviet General:

Gen. Yevgraf Zhivago: By the second winter [of World War I, G. B.], the boots had worn out ... but the line still held. Even Comrade Lenin underestimated both the anguish of that 900-mile long front ... as well as our own cursed capacity for suffering. Half the men went into action without any arms ... irregular rations ... led by officers they didn't trust.

Officer: [to soldiers] Come on, you bastards!

Gen. Yevgraf Zhivago: And those they did trust ...

Pasha: [leaps out of the trench and begins leading his men in a charge] Come on, Comrades! Forward, comrades! Earth-shakers!

[an artillery shell explodes in front of him; he falls to the ground, and the soldiers retreat to their trench]

Gen. Yevgraf Zhivago: Finally, when they could stand it no longer, they began doing what every army dreams of doing ...

[the soldiers begin to leave their trenches]

Gen. Yevgraf Zhivago: They began to go home.

Communist General Zhivago brings this story as the prelude to the Revolution, but compared to the other First World War films of the time this second most popular film of the 1960s unintentionally conveys a rather peculiar implicit message:²¹⁹ if only more men had had the guts to leave the trenches, the war could have ended sooner and millions of lives would have been saved.²²⁰ But only very few soldiers left their trenches and those who did were treated as criminals and sometimes executed. From the 1950s onwards this raised the question as to who the real enemy of these soldiers had been.

4 The Real Enemy

Within the context of the Cold War this 'Enemy Within' theme gained extra significance. With the McCarthy witch-hunts still in everybody's memory and the Fifth Column rhetoric very much a staple of Western propaganda this was no light allegation: the enemy was not to be looked for within the ranks of artists and intellectuals, but in the upper classes of politics and the military. The fact that Joseph Losey, director of *King and Country*, one of the most vehement indictments of these deserters' executions, was a victim of blacklisting himself only reinforced this point.²²¹ Stanley Kubrick's sardonic *Dr. Strangelove* (1964) brought the same point home in an eerily contemporary setting, right after the Cuba Missiles Crisis. In a telling Great War reference, the responsibility of both generals and politicians for the war madness is made abundantly clear:

General Jack D. Ripper: Mandrake, do you recall what Clemenceau once said about war?

ebrary Group Capt. Lionel Mandrake: No, I don't think I do, sir, no.

General Jack D. Ripper: He said war was too important to be left to the generals. When he said that, 50 years ago, he might have been right. But today, war is too important to be left to politicians. They have neither the time, the training, nor the inclination for strategic thought. I can no longer sit back and allow Communist infiltration, Communist indoctrination, Communist subversion and the international Communist conspiracy to sap and impu-rify all of our precious bodily fluids.

Considering the Freedom vs. Oppression narrative the Western powers used during the Cold War, the simple fact that such openly critical films could be made and screened might have had some propagandistic value in itself. But the thing was: even Western nations did not always allow these films to be shown.

The most notorious case is *Paths of Glory*, which only saw a general release in France in 1975, after initial screenings in neighboring Belgium in 1958 had been disrupted by French officers, threats had been expressed towards theater owners and the French Embassy had asked not to show the film again.²²²

Other Western films faced problems as well. In Italy, for instance, the production of Mario Monicelli's 1959 *La Grande Guerra*, the first ironic treatment of the conflict, was initially boycotted by the Italian army and right-wing politicians, journalists and veterans called for its suppression.²²³ A few years earlier, the script of *A Farewell to Arms* had to be rewritten on the urging of the Italian Defence Minister, which not only led to the resignation of director John Huston (Gundle 106), but perhaps also helps to explain this remarkable caption during the opening credits:

We tell a story out of one of the wildest theaters of World War I – the snowcapped alpine peaks and muddy plains of Northern Italy. Here between 1915 and 1918 the Italians stood against the German and Austrian invaders. No people ever fought more valiantly, no nation ever rose more gallantly out of defeat to victory.²²⁴

The Charles Vidor film did not mention that the Italians were the initial invaders at the Isonzo, but for the first time the less than heroic parts of

ebp that Italian 'defeat' (the disorder, desertion and executions during the retreat following the Battle of Caporetto) were shown in a film. Other controversial war films (*La Grande Guerra* and *Uomini contro*) about the Italian campaigns would follow suit, each of them encountering censorship problems (cf. Gundle 105-106).

5 The 'Communist' Take

Ironically, it seems as if Eastern European (Communist bloc) films about desertion and the execution of one's own soldiers had fewer problems with the local censors. Of course, the political system had dramatically changed since 1918 in these countries. Any criticism of political and military leaders in these films could easily be labeled as directed against war time imperialist and bourgeois enemies of the people. The most striking element of these Eastern European films, however, is the way they point to ethnic nationalism as the crucial factor in these cases of desertion.

Essential to a good understanding of the war in Central Europe is the fact that nations/people who found themselves on both sides of enemy lines were forced to fight their own. Such was the plight of the Jews all over Europe, but also of the Polish, Czech, Romanian, Ukrainian, Croatian and other soldiers conscripted into either the Russian or the Prussian and Austro-Hungarian armies. The official Communist doctrine had it that "a nation is a historically constituted, stable community of people, formed on the basis of a common language, territory, economic life, and psychological makeup manifested in a common culture" (Stalin qtd. in Fowkes 5). Although a case could be made that the Communist States in

Eastern and Central Europe functioned not so much as satellites but as colonies of the Soviet Union (Judt, ch. VI, esp. 167-171), the official view was that they were separate entities with their own national culture, all of them with ethnic minorities and differences within these states which were, by and large, recognized and respected (Fowkes ch. 4). Apart from these different national identities – particularly exemplified during Olympic Games or other sport tournaments – these countries were supposed to share an internationalist and communist identity.

During the Habsburg rule, internationalism had a completely different ring to it. Austria-Hungary was a multi-ethnic state which recognized the many languages and identities – even in the army – as long as the nation itself came first. To those ethnic communities striving for independence, Austria-Hungary was an imperialist and chauvinist state or maybe even

ebrary occupier.²²⁵ The World War One implications of Austro-Hungarian policies for the ethnic minorities are dramatically evoked in the 1964 Romanian film *Pădurea spânzuraților* (*Forest of the Hanged*), for which Liviu Ciulei received the Best Director Award in Cannes a year later. Drafted in the Austro-Hungarian Army, ethnic Romanian First Lieutenant Bologa is forced to fight Romanians and interrogate and punish Romanian peasants who allegedly disobeyed an order not to plough near the frontlines. Appalled, he tries to desert and, in the final moments of the film, is hanged in a scene echoing the opening minutes, where under Bologa's supervision a Czech deserter was executed after being court-martialled. *Forest of the Hanged* offers many scenes where ethnic Czech, Romanian, Polish, Ruthenian, Hungarian and Austrian soldiers and civilians deal with one another in respectful, caring and even loving ways. But the military system, represented by the Austrian General von Karg, shows no mercy. When Bologa asks to be transferred to another front, where he would not have to fight his fellow Romanians, von Karg responds that this question shows a lack of love for his fatherland.

This tension between the official (legal) and ethnic (sentimental) forms of belonging is also present in a Polish comedy from 1986. The following scene from Janusz Majewski's *C. K. Dezerterzy* (*H. M. Deserters*) suggests that while the many ethnic groups in Austria-Hungary did not find it hard to live and work together, they lacked a common, national identity. The new Austrian Oberleutnant von Nogai is confronted by the insubordination of his garrison:

Lt von Nogai: Have you arranged the company according to my orders?

Sgt: Yes, sir!

Lt: We'll see. Austrians, step forward!

[nobody moves]

Lt: It seems our company has no Austrians.

Sgt: I would like to report that we're all Austrians.

Lt: All of us? Then why did no one step forward?

Sgt: You wanted me to arrange them by nationality, so we have

ebrary Czechs, Slovaks, Slovenes, Bosnians, Herzegovians, and Poles.

Lt: In other words, a bunch of wretches not fit for regular life.
Where are the Germans?

Sgt: You interrupted me, so I didn't have time to say that the Germans are on the left.

Lt: So there are some. Bravo. Order them to sing the National Anthem.

[complete silence]

Lt: Didn't you understand? The National Anthem.

Sgt: Attention! The National Anthem!

Lt: Sing!

[one soldier starts singing "Gott erhalte, Gott beschütze" in a very high voice]

Lt: An eunuch? We have an eunuch in this brothel?

Sgt: Company, sing!

[only one soldier starts singing "... Unsern Kaiser, unser La-a-and", he winks at the Sgt]

Sgt: I would like to report, that this is because they do not know German. They know the Anthem, but can't sing it.

Lt: They know it, but can't sing it? I'll teach it to you so well you'll be singing it in your sleep! You'll be singing it with tears in your eyes, you politically suspected pigs!

This lot of 'Austrian' soldiers deserts and only escapes execution because the Kaiser seems to have stepped down. Prisoners and soldiers alike start celebrating until a German regiment arrives, eager to shoot these Habsburg renegades (and by doing so making it absolutely clear who is really in charge of the Central Powers operations). With the German rifles

directed against their former allies, a courier arrives. Without a word, the Germans leave. The war is over. A big celebration starts, with the soldiers enthusiastically waving their Polish and Hungarian flags. The implication is clear: they did not just lose the war, by losing they gained national independence.

But not all inhabitants of Austria-Hungary were winners. Jerzy Kawalerowicz's 1982 *Austeria* is a loving, nostalgic but also painful paean for the Polish Jews, presenting their world "moments before its tragic holocaust."²²⁶ As such it also provides a forceful corrective to Poland's troubled dealings with its Jewish population. By setting his film on the first day of the war and showing all sorts of violence towards Jews (and others, it should be added), the director clearly links the many pogroms of the First World War to the Holocaust during the Second World War. Nationalism seems not an issue at all, here. As Ewa Mazierska noted, none of the characters care about Poland or Austria-Hungary: "They identify not with a state, a country or a nation, but their own town or [...] their house and place of work" (211). In that respect *Austeria* "celebrates the multiculturalism of pre-war Galicia" (212), like many of the other Cold War era WWI-films produced behind the Iron Curtain.

More than a decade before Jean-Jacques Annaud would tackle the war effort of African soldiers in *La Victoire en chantant* (cf. Filmography), Vulo Radev's *The Peach Thief* showed how white and black French prisoners lived and made music together on the Balkan Front. More controversial today is the film's representation of the Bulgarian and Serbian armies.²²⁷ During the war they were enemies (Bulgaria having entered the war by declaring war on Serbia in 1915); during the Cold War they were socialist neighbors. Set in the old Bulgarian capital of Veliko Turnovo at the end of the war, the film tends towards the latter position. While the Serbs, as part of the Entente and winners of the war, can be seen as co-responsible for the trauma of the Treaty of Neuilly, which had cost Bulgaria dearly in territory, money and prestige, *The Peach Thief* does not frame them as adversaries. Title character Ivo, a highly endearing, civilized, French-speaking Serbian prisoner of war is the doomed love-interest of Liza, the wife of a war-weary yet proud Bulgarian officer. Ivo believes in the Revolution, as do rioting Bulgarian soldiers who are fed up with the war and who dream of world peace and a true brotherhood of man. In one of their tender love scenes Liza caresses the very different buttons on Ivo's uniform:

Liza: English, Serbian, Romanian ... And this eagle?

Liza: Why an Austrian too?

Ivo: Buttons don't fight each other.

In the final scene Ivo is shot, implying that this utopia of a peaceful harmony was not exactly realized. But the longing for such a world is very much central to Eastern and Central European films about the First World War. While these countries' sacrifices in the Second World War had been even greater, it was the Great War they most of all tended to frame as the cause of their pacifism.

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6 Western Europe: Integration and Reconciliation

On an institutional level, political and cultural life in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s was marked mainly by European integration based on French-German reconciliation, a Never Again attitude towards war and, consequently, a unison denunciation of fascism and everything it stood for. The result was a form of historical political correctness in which the animosity of the former enemies tended to be downplayed and dissenting voices were silenced. In France in particular this led to forced amnesia which was only very rarely alluded to. François Truffaut does so in *Domicile conjugale* (1970) when a neighbor of the newly-weds claims that he will not leave his apartment until Marshall Pétain is reburied in the grave

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ebrary prepared for him at Verdun.²²⁸ But the general attitude towards the Germans is one of prudent respect. From the Italian-Yugoslav exploitation spy-thriller *Fräulein Doktor* (1969) up to the Anglo-American air ace films discussed earlier, German characters are never the ruthless Nazi butchers of many World War Two films. In that respect, the fascist era is seen as a cruel but essentially a-historical parenthesis in European relationships, while the First World War becomes not so much a conflict of Allied versus Central Powers but of outdated oligarchs out of touch with the brotherly feelings ordinary Europeans have for one another.

Truffaut's *Jules et Jim* (1962) forcefully extends a theme of Jean Renoir's *La grande illusion* (1937), the friendship and respect between a French and a German World War One soldier. In Truffaut's film the war seems no more than a violent interlude in the protagonists' passionate friendship. This strong sentiment is echoed in the sacred chapel of Truffaut's *La*

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chambre verte (1978), where Great War veteran Julien also honors a German soldier – a photograph of Oskar Werner/ Jules in uniform – whose plane he shot down: “when you look at this photo, it’s difficult to think of this man as an enemy.” A quite extraordinary example of French-German reconciliation happens at the end of the fourth episode of Maurice Pialat’s *La maison des bois* (1971). After a German warplane has been shot down by a French pilot, the small town where the series is set flocks towards the site of the crash to look at the wreck. French officers follow suit and solemnly salute the German pilot, dead in the cockpit. In the final, wordless three minute scene we see an extremely long shot with the camera slowly zooming in on the plane, used as bier for the covered corpse, and a French soldier guarding it. For the first time since the opening scene of the episode music is used: a slow, mournful chamber orchestra version of Haydn’s melody known as “Deutschland über Alles”. This is neither about patriotism nor revanchism, but all about heartfelt respect and an overwhelming feeling of loss.

Mourning is central to most French treatments of the First World War, most explicitly so in *La maison des bois* (where the vibrant mother and foster mother Jeanne dies of grief after her son is killed in action), *La chambre verte* (the story of a man who lives to honor the dead) and Bertrand Tavernier’s 1989 *La vie et rien d’autre* (about the identification of unknown soldiers after the Armistice). A peculiar film in this respect is the Belgian-French production *Rendez-vous à Bray* (André Delvaux, 1971) about a Luxembourg musician who is supposed to meet his mobilized French friend but the soldier never shows up. Even those who remain neutral during the war are tainted with a feeling of loss and emptiness. The war itself is neither seen nor heard in the film, but we do see the trembling of a chandelier –as a marker of the distant cannons. The main character plays the piano in a movie theater where (unlike in Troell’s *Här har du ditt liv*) not war images are screened, but *Fantomas*, the phantom of the war.²²⁹ These pictures hardly contain any battlefield scenes and focus mainly on the grief and the aftermath of the war.

7 Imperialism

British depictions of the war from the 1960s up to the 1980s are much more political. In keeping with the dramatic social transformations and tensions of British society in these decades they tend to reframe it basically as a class war (cf. Kelly 178–180; Sorlin, “Cinema and the Memory” 24; Marcus 296; Chapman 132–134; Véray 170). In only one case

is this analysis extended to the most notorious and violent bone of contention of British postwar politics, the Irish question.²³⁰ In 1975 – two years after both the UK and Ireland had joined the European Economic Community and while the Troubles and sectarian killings were escalating – Ken Loach in *Days of Hope* has seventeen-year old Ben, brother-in-law of conscientious objector Philip, have the following argument with his sister/Philip's wife after he has been accepted into the army in 1916 and it turns out he will not be fighting the Germans:

Ben: We're off to Ireland, like.

Sarah: You're going to Ireland?

Ben: Oh, don't start your politics, our kid.

Sarah: I'm saying nowt.

Ben: You don't need to say owt. Your face says it for you. I got to do what I'm told, don't I?

Sarah: I expect that's what the German army said as they marched into Belgium.

Ben: [in disbelief] You're not comparing us with them, are you?

Sarah: Why not? The Irish have as much right to fight for their freedom as the Belgians have.

Ben: Get off.

In Ireland Ben's regiment is ordered to raid houses of suspected IRA-members, just like his own house was raided by British police at the beginning of the film, looking for his brother-in-law. Again, the real adversary turns out to be one's own defense force. It's telling that in this *Days of Hope* episode the only enemy we see is a ten-year old Irish boy who leads a British soldier into a mine (neither Irish nor German military are shown) and that this soldier was born in London from Irish parents. In Loach's view the First World War as well as the conflict in Ireland placed David against David, while (upper-class, capitalist) Goliath remained unchallenged. His take proved extremely controversial.²³¹

A year before Jean-Jacques Annaud's *La Victoire en chantant* (*Black and White in Color*) would scoop up the Academy Award for Best-Foreign Language Film with a comedy about the First World War in Africa, many people in Britain still proved unable to see the war in Ireland as essentially a colonial conflict too. Post-colonial issues have been central to Western societies since the 1950s, but apart from Annaud's farcical treatment of the Western powers' behavior in the African theater of war and the few films about the Australian and Canadian involvement, the plight of subalterns during the Great War still has to be represented on the big screen by Western film makers.²³²

8 Distance and Memory

From the 1950s onwards the First World War is explicitly linked to issues of memory and distance in time. *La chambre verte* and *La vie et rien d'autre* are essentially about remembrance, but earlier on as well the war was treated as something of a past era. Films as different as *La Madelon* (1955), Axel von Ambesser's *Der brave Soldat Schwejk*, *Jules et Jim*, *King and Country*, *Här har du ditt liv*, *Johnny Got His Gun* and, more recently, *Les Fragments d'Antonin* and *The Wipers Times* (2013) use shaky black-and-white archival footage or pictures to evoke the war. The overall effect is one of alienation: what a strange, far-away and primitive world this was, where Tsars and Kaisers ruled and people moved so jerkily. In *La Madelon* the archival silent images are integrated quite nicely into the black and white feature film. The cutting of *Jules et Jim*, on the other hand, deliberately adds to the jerkiness and "unrealism" (see Insdorf 87). In *Les Fragments d'Antonin* the trembling of the shell-shocked soldiers is underscored by the jerky images.²³³ Films with contemporary political aims (like *Johnny Got His Gun* in the time of Vietnam) were not necessarily helped by these antiquated images. Overall they reinforced the idea that in truly modern times a conflict such as the Great War was no longer possible, which raises the question why a world such as ours, so convinced of its own modernity and structural difference vis-à-vis the era of the First World War, seems increasingly obsessed with this ancient conflict? Are we exorcising ghosts when we are watching this old footage? Does our current World War One cult function as a way to soothe our bad conscience or darkest fears about armed conflicts in our day and age?

The steady stream of First World War films made during the Cold War poses these questions in an even more uncanny way: the trenches might have been something from the past, as thermonuclear warfare threatened

to kill all people, soldiers and citizens alike. In that respect the Great War maybe functioned as some form of displacement: the sepia-tinted images of a film like *King and Country* evoke the past as a cruel and violent but above all far-away place.

In essence that past and place could not be communicated. Or so Edgar Reitz seems to suggest in the opening scene of his epic, sixteen-hour *Heimat - Eine deutsche Chronik* (1984). In May 1919, Paul Simon returns from the war. Home in the small rural village of Schabbach after a six-day walk from France he joins his father in the forge, embraces his mother and, urinating on the dunghill, re-connects with his native soil. But when the family and neighbors flock in to welcome him and discuss their own war-time experiences, Paul remains silent. His best friend Helmut, who died in Russia, appears to him in a vision and talks about the white shroud the fallen soldiers received in heaven, like angels. Paul stares in wonder. Throughout this eighteen-minute scene he only mutters the words "Wait a moment, mother." About the war he does or cannot talk.

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