SOME LEGENDS OF THE WAR

M. Albert Dauzat's book * is of real psychological interest. The creation of legends in our own time and by our own people is surely as interesting as the stories of mediæval Italians or even of the contemporaries of Cuchulain. This naturally applies only to the unconsciously created legend, for during the war governments for their own purposes invented stories, allowed false reports to go without contradiction, and suppressed facts when it suited them to do so. The psychology of masses is such that the necessity for these subterfuges is sometimes imperative, and it would be mere hypocrisy to blame governments for not immediately and always publishing the exact truth. Thus the uncensored publication of the news of the disastrous battle of Charleroi in August, 1914, would certainly have caused a panic in the Allied countries. On the other hand, the ingenious Wolff was rather too fertile in subtle yarns, and his scientific fabrications were frequently so very unlikely that the most credulous of his own people doubted him.

How difficult it is to obtain a precise account of any event, even from eye-witnesses, is shown by an anecdote given in M. Dauzat's volume. At a meeting of scientists a squabble between two people was suddenly and unexpectedly sprung upon them by previous arrangement. The president of the meeting, under pretense of securing legal evidence, requested everyone present to write a report of what had happened. Though the assembly consisted exclusively of psychologists, jurists, and doctors, only one report contained less than twenty per cent of errors, thirteen had more than fifty per cent of errors, and thirty-four had invented between ten and fifteen per cent of the details. When men of science, quietly met together, can make so many errors in a single report there can be no further surprise at the legends invented and implicitly believed in during the agitated years of war. Quite apart from those artificially started by governments, either in their own or the enemy's country, there were numbers which grew up spontaneously, usually from a slight basis of fact but so magnified or distorted as to be unrecognizable. The famous story of the angels at Mons belongs to this category. On September 20, 1914, Mr. Arthur Machen published in the *Evening News* a little imaginative sketch called 'The Archers' in which the soldiers were supposed to receive help from spirits. This story, running from mouth to mouth, rapidly lost all memory of its real origin, and was reported as an actual occurrence. Many occult reviews gave it credence; it was mentioned in sermons, and in August, 1915, a wounded lance corporal asserted that he and his comrades had seen 'strange lights' and 'outstretched wings' during the retreat. A similar legend, though less easily traceable, is the 'miracle of the Marne.' Rather more original (for it was scarcely likely that Jeanne d'Arc would be left out), is the story of how St. Anthony of Padua came to a drill-ground in Italy, and said to the instructor: 'Why torment these men uselessly? The war will be over in two months.' M. Dauzat gives it as his opinion that the saint was a pro-German monk from a

* *Légendes, Prophéties, et Superstitions de la Guerre.* By Albert Dauzat. Paris, La Renaissance du Livre. 5*f.*

neighboring monastery. The most picturesque of the heroic legends is that of 'Debout les Morts!' which was a command actually given by Lieutenant Péricard in a trench filled with dead at the critical moment of a German attack.

One of the most amazing of the 'official' legends is that of the Nuremberg bombs, supposed to have been dropped by French aeroplanes before the declaration of war and announced in the Reichstag by Herr von Bethmann-Hollweg. Two years later the Mayor of Nuremberg emphatically denied that any such thing had happened! Another more amusing and harmless official 'legend,' or rather hysterical error, occurred in March, 1918, when Paris was first bombarded by long-range guns. In spite of every evidence to the contrary, the military government of Paris issued a startling *communiqué* saying that the city had been bombarded by Gothas!

Newspapers, controlled in their legitimate functions by censorship, were sometimes responsible for rather feeble legends. From them came the story of the German taken prisoner with a bit of bread and butter, the myth of the 'Russian steam roller' (though not of the Russian army passing through England, which was a popular invention), and that most false and nauseating of legends — the 'happy soldier.' In England Captain Bairnsfather performed a similar feat, though he never pretended that trench life was comfortable, as some Parisian journalists apparently did. Some of these newspaper legends are worth recording. The *Münchner Neueste Nachrichten* solemnly informed its readers that seventy thousand of the French 1915 class had deserted; an Italian paper said that the Turks were advancing on the Suez Canal with three hundred thousand bags of sand packed on camels to block the water-way; and the *Canadian News* said Edison had invented a cannon which would fire a shell from New York to Berlin. Besides the new tales that were invented, old ones were refurbished, so that early in 1917 the French public was gratified by the publication of a picture post card showing Maréchal Joffre watching in a front-line trench while a weary poilu slept. The same story was told of the first Napoleon, who was even less likely than Joffre to perform or condone so sentimental a breach of discipline.

Not all stories can be laid to the credit of newspapers (which, after all, frequently only gave currency to generally accepted rumors). Some, like the maps supposed to be hidden behind the advertisement sheets of *Bouillon Kub* and the cans of gold carried off in a magic automobile, could only have been due to popular imagination. Moreover, the civilians were not the only people who invented legends. Soldiers, confined to their own tiny sector, and skeptical of newspaper reports which their experience had taught them were generally false, were ready and credulous victims. Every French defeat was attributed by the troops to treachery; thus Charleroi was supposed to be due to the betrayal of the French army by two generals (whose names it would be ungenerous to repeat), who, according to wounded men, had been court-martialed and shot. These two generals are still alive and in possession of their rank, which could scarcely be the case if these rumors had been true. The French reverse at the Chemin des Dames in 1917, caused a wild outcry of treachery; and even the victory of the Marne was frequently attributed to the treachery of an Alsatian general in the German army. Rumors of attacks and offensives, of victories and

reverses, were astonishingly numerous in the trenches. Stories which someone had heard 'down the line' from someone at 'Corps' or 'Division' were constantly circulated; and those which did not originate in some piece of misinformation conveyed by an officer were invented by the men themselves.

It would be possible to add many examples from the British army to those recorded by M. Dauzat of the French. Thus, in 1917, a sergeant-major gave a runner a note to take up to the front line, with the command to hurry, as the information contained in the 'chit' was that the Germans were sending over gas at midnight. The runner naturally told the news to everyone he met, and when he arrived perspiring at his destination was not a little crestfallen to find himself reprimanded for spreading a false alarm, as the gas was to be sent over by the British! In December, 1916, a private in the Bedfords asserted with many solemn oaths that a Canadian had told him that the Canadian Corps had taken Lens and 10,000 prisoners. No such action had taken place, and unless the story was a perversion of a big raid it must have been pure invention. But private soldiers were not the only sinners. Wild stories of huge victories in the north were circulated among the retreating troops on the Somme in March, 1918, some on the authority of 'Division.' Less tragic than these is the rumor which was known as 'the wind-up of the Boche batman,' and which will be remembered by anyone who was in the Eighth Corps in May, 1918. The story (officially sent in typewritten sheets from 'Brigade') was that the batman of a German colonel had stated that a great attack had been discussed by several commanders while he was waiting at table. This attack was to come off on a certain date, at night, on a front stretching from Arras to Ypres, and was to be preceded by an artillery preparation of terrific intensity. The joy of the front-line troops when they received this information with the intimation that the 'higher command' thought it extremely likely that the information was correct and the order that positions were to be held 'at all costs,' can only adequately be imagined by old gentlemen who sit in the corners of clubs and discourse patriotically. Needless to say, the attack took place about three weeks later on the Chemin des Dames against the French. The number of these legends was very large, and their multiplicity of detail and longevity call forth the deepest admiration for the imagination of those who conceived them and those who embellished them.

Such a book as this shows the vast imagination of common people. Out of the folk consciousness grows up much of the literature of an age, and no doubt the angels at Mons and Jeanne d'Arc at the Marne will be told as tales long after the works of accurate historians have disappeared, as the sound of the horn of Roland at Roncesvalles outlived the memory of the wars in which it was a mere apocryphal incident. Inevitably much of this modern invention seems to us puerile, vulgar, and trite, but had we sufficient largeness of sympathy to receive it we should find it only an expression of the idealism of great masses. Fantomas, Sherlock Holmes, Hindenburg, Kitchener — what are they but myths, creations of the popular fancy, ideal characters which satisfy a longing for the romantic and the marvelous? Victor Hugo — and how many of his predecessors — discovered that the superman was a popular ideal before Nietzsche was born.

The Times