BAPTISMS OF FIRE:
HOW TRAINING, EQUIPMENT, AND IDEAS ABOUT THE NATION SHAPED THE
BRITISH, FRENCH, AND GERMAN SOLDIERS' EXPERIENCES OF WAR IN 1914

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ABSTRACT

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Training, equipment, and ideas about the nation shaped the British, French, and German soldiers’ experiences of war in 1914. Though current scholarship contained works that examined each of those topics separately or in combination, little research investigated the connection in a comparative model from the perspective of the soldiers. This work analyzed the British, French, and German soldiers of World War I during the initial phase (August–November 1914). This critical period of the war proved an excellent way to test these ideas. The project relied heavily on combatants’ personal accounts, which included archival sources. The troopers experience with initial combat served as a test. How those soldiers reacted suggested the connections with training, equipment, and ideas about the nation.

The results supported the theory that the professionalism of the British soldier and the French soldier’s devotion to nation and comrade outweighed the German Army’s reliance on both equipment and the doctrine of winning at all costs. Nationalism, equipment, and training influenced soldiery. German equipment provided an edge, but it was not enough. Not only did nationalist sentiment among soldiers exist at the beginning of World War I, three different conceptions of nationalism were present. British and especially French nationalism proved stronger than the German variety, as demonstrated by the ordeal of combat. Professionalism in soldiery mattered; the British proved this point. A British nation existed, and it included soldiers of England, Scotland, and Ireland. Ideas about the nation as well as training led to success, but they also led to atrocities. Such was the case of the German Army. Camaraderie played no small role in the war-time experiences of all three combatants.
Larger conclusions stemmed from this work. Dissimilar ideas about the nation influenced soldiers differently. Divergent types of training experiences yielded distinct results. Camaraderie proved to be the most important component of effective soldiery. Disadvantages in equipment had a negative impact on the psyche of soldiers. German barbarism demonstrated the dangers of nationalism as well as the mentality of winning at all costs.
To those who shake off the albatross.
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INTRODUCTION
THE DIFFERENCES IN CULTURE

The year 1914 marked a watershed event in history as the Great War checked nineteenth century European society and paved the way for a new era. The soldiers who marched forward to participate in this crisis arose not from a vacuum but rather from their respective cultures. The testimonies of the troopers involved in the initial, mobile phase of World War I demonstrated the influences of their states’ cultural background. Differences in training, equipment, and ideas about the nation resulted in diverging experiences for the British, French, and German soldiers in 1914. The three nations each approached the impending war in dissimilar fashions with regard to preparation and ideology. Not only did the results of the initial phase of World War I depend upon the contrasting approaches, but the consequences of that period also rested with the participating soldiers. How those troopers experienced those initial phases of combat influenced the outcome of the war. Though common traits, such as the presence of camaraderie and nationalism, manifested themselves amidst the soldiers, both differences in preparation and contrasting types of nationalism existed among the three armies. The variations of nationalism present in British, French, and German culture produced distinct attitudes within the three nations’ soldiers. These combatants, in their own words, demonstrated these particularities in their experience with war. The enthusiasm for war amongst the servicemen appeared in the accounts of the future participants. Yet, there needed to be a litmus test to truly demonstrate the psyche of the combatants. The initial ordeal of war, or “baptism of fire,” provided such a test. This “baptism” brought forth the accurate sentiments and real emotions of the British, French, and German soldiers. Their personal accounts, war journals, and letters during the Fall of 1914
revealed their genuine spirit. These accounts described the combatants’ mental states; the words illuminated their pure war-time experiences.

Variations in preparation, geography, and culture were at work at the start of World War I. The British Army waged it could accomplish its goal of helping the French halt a potential German assault on France with a small, professional army. It was small compared to the conscripted armies of the French and German states. It was also professional; the British emphasized quality over quantity. The result was the British Expeditionary Force of 1914. It demonstrated professionalism throughout the early phase of World War I. How this force prepared for and handled the stacked odds suggested as much. Its performance on the battlefield as well as its interaction with civilians revealed this mindset of professionalism.

Of course, geography played no small role in preparation. Great Britain reasoned that this small, professional force could accomplish the mission, partly because of the protective geographic feature of the English Channel (as well as its Royal Navy). This waterway kept the island nation safe from attack. Though the individualism present in British nationalism may have also played a role in its volunteer army, geography was paramount. With this advantage, the British could afford to make that wager. The French, however, were less fortunate. The loss to the Prussian Army in 1871, the unification of Germany that same year, the common border with the novel Germany, and the threat of a fresh attack by the more populated German people all forced France’s hand with regard to preparation. Conscription, in the French mindset, was necessary. Quantity was needed. The “lost” provinces of Alsace-Lorraine to the newly unified Germany angered the French state. The idea of reclaiming that area resulted in French planning, for those provinces “belonged” to France. Germany disagreed. Germany also incorporated conscription, focusing on quantity. It could, however, be more selective (than France), given its
larger population. Still, Germany had more than one border. On its east stood Russia, which was a potential enemy in the event of war. Not only was Russia a possible opponent to the German people, Russia’s population dwarfed that of Germany. This actuality of geography influenced the psyche of Germany, and its armies. A fear, a fear of being attacked by surrounding neighbors, manifested itself not only into German readiness for war but also into German nationalism itself. Geography definitely contributed to the preparations for war, but another element was at work. The collective elements of German and French nationalism, perhaps, also contributed, especially in terms of the acceptance of conscription.

That was not to suggest that no similarities existed amidst the soldiers of the three different nations. The majority of servicemen experienced an enthusiasm once they received the news of war. Sentiments of nationalism presented themselves as the soldiers marched toward the front. All troopers faced physical and psychological obstacles as well as hindrances to fighting. The combatants received their “baptism of fire,” and all three armies included soldiers who continued evidencing their adherence to the nation. Disillusionment with war, however, appeared as well. Combat also demonstrated the existence of a deep devotion to comrades.

Differences, however, remained. The variations of nationalism within the three nations also resulted in divergences. The background and culture of the British, French, and German nations dictated their type of nation. The differences presented themselves in the accounts of the combatants. The German nation exhibited qualities of the Romantic Movement, thus demonstrating a “romantic nationalism.” The British nation featured ideas from the Enlightenment and Age of Reason, and, as a result, produced a “rational nationalism.” The French, meanwhile, developed a hybrid of the previous two. The timing in the culmination of
these three nations, and the cultural movements of that period, influenced the type of nationalism they were to foster.

Another key variation involved the preparation for war. The equipment differed in quality, quantity, and organization. Though all soldiers received training, the experience of training resulted in slightly different attitudes among the soldiers. This was particularly true in the French Army. For the French trooper, discipline was not absolute, and neither was respect and admiration for superior officers. The professionalism of the British army differed from the French and German armies. That was not to suggest the German and French conscripted armies performed poorly. There were elements of heroism and camaraderie in both. However, British professionalism, influenced by the preparation for war by the state as well as this rational nationalism, produced a higher quality of soldier. These soldiers performed well in battle, demonstrated heroism and dedication toward their comrades, and exhibited sympathy for civilians caught in the middle of conflict.

The experience of combat brought forth divergent attitudes. With regard to civilian populations, the Germany Army acted in a more barbaric fashion than the British and French. The British soldiers exuded notions of professionalism more so than the French or German troopers. German nationalism appeared less inclusive than French or British nationalism. Devotion to the nation after the ordeal of combat remained a steady feature for the French soldiers, whereas the German experience of war produced mixed results. The British troopers remained steady in their business.
Other variables appeared. A sense of “Britishness” existed in the army, and soldiers from the island as well as from Ireland demonstrated this notion.\(^1\) Nationalism, indeed, manifested itself in the accounts of the French and German soldiers involved in 1914 as well. In addition, three different types of nationalisms were present. The mindset of not only the German nation but also the German Army influenced the preparation for war as well as its execution.

Three different soldiers went to war in 1914. The armies of Great Britain and France engaged the armies of Germany, beginning the Great War, or World War I. Those soldiers experienced the war differently based on variations in equipment, training, and ideas about the nation. The actions of the preceding five weeks caused this encounter.

The spark to this event occurred on 28 June 1914 with the assassination of the heir to Austria-Hungary, Archduke Franz Ferdinand in Sarajevo.\(^2\) This political assassination occurred due to the culture of nationalism. According to the Black Hand, the Serbian nationalism group that relied on acts of terror, this heir to the throne of the Austria-Hungary stood in the way of “greater Serbia.” Austria-Hungary felt Serbia itself deserved blame and declared war. Serbia’s alliance with Russia (which had its own alliance with France) and Austria-Hungary’s alliance with Germany complicated the issue.

In the late summer of 1914, the German army embarked on a mission to defeat the French quickly in battle. The French war plan, Plan XVII, sought to use the right wing of their

\(^1\) The term “Britishness” comes from Linda Colley, Britons: Forging a Nation (1707-1837), (Yale: Yale University Press, 1992).

\(^2\) Franz Ferdinand’s wife, Sophie, also died in the assassination.
army to regain the “lost territories” of Alsace-Lorraine.³ The German war plan was the creation of Count Alfred von Schlieffen, Chief of the General Staff in Germany from 1891-1906. As historian John Keegan noted, the Schlieffen Plan,

was the most important government document written in any country in the first decade of the twentieth century; it might be argued that it was to prove the most important official document of the last hundred years, for what it caused to ensue on the field of battle, the hopes it inspired, the hopes it dashed, were to have consequences that persist to this day.⁴

The Schlieffen Plan called for the German army’s right wing to serve as the business end of an attack, sweeping through Belgium and northern France.⁵ Though the German government requested free passage through Belgium, it did not expect that country to grant its request. When Belgium refused, the German army invaded. This action provided an excuse the British government desired to send its army, due to its “moral obligation” based on Article Seven in the Treaty of London of 1839.⁶ The British Expeditionary Force arrived on the continent to serve as the left wing of the French Army. The line of the Franco-British forces, or Entente, moved

³ Germany “received” Alsace-Lorrain from France after the German people’s victory over France in the Franco-Prussian War (1870-1), with the unification of Germany also occurring.


⁵ The plan called for a swift war in the west where the German armies on their right would sweep across Belgium and northern France with “the last German soldier’s shoulder brushing the coast.” The Germans desired a swift victory in the west while fending off Russian troops on the east until troops could be transferred. The plan accepted the idea of British involvement.

⁶ Article Seven read, “Belgium, within the limits specified in Articles I, II, and IV, shall form an independent and perpetually neutral State. It shall be bound to observe such neutrality towards all other States.” Britain, France, and Prussia all signed the treaty. See http://www.digitalsurvivors.com/archives/treatyoflondon1839.php. Politically, this allowed British involvement. In 1914, there was no official treaty that bound the British into helping the French, hence, the term “entente,” which translates to English as “arrangement” or “understanding.”
forward to liberate Belgium and gain Alsace-Lorraine. The German Army, still operating under the Schlieffen Plan, moved west. What then took place was mobile warfare. Marching and retreating were the orders of the day.

Perhaps British Colonel W. A. C. Saunders Knox Gore of the 1st Battalion, 60th Rifles, upon writing his memoirs at the tender age of eighty-one, said it best when he wrote about his early experience of World War I:

Most people who think of the first World War think of it in terms of trenches and dugouts. It must be remembered that at the very beginning of hostilities there was a very short period of moving war and manœuvre…. These were perhaps the most interesting periods of the whole War.7

These “most interesting periods” began in early August 1914 with a collision between the Entente and German armies, followed by an Entente retreat. The Entente armies withdrew to the Marne River outside Paris, where they recovered. They defeated the German army in the largest battle of the war to date, called, conveniently enough, the Battle of the Marne. The German army now retreated with the Allies in pursuit. Attempts at outflanking each other occurred, and major battles occurred at the Aisne and Ypres. This phase of the war also went by the label, “the race to the sea.” Though both sides attempted to outflank the other, neither proved successful. By the end of November 1914, the troops of all countries involved in this theater of World War I, the “western front,” were entrenched—positions that virtually remained unchanged for the next four years. The stalemate, or war of attrition, began.

7 Colonel W. A. C. Knox Gore Saunders, 75/132/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
Methodology

This is, in essence, a comparative look at the British, French, and German soldiers of 1914. The work is a micro-history examining how wartime preparation and variations of nationalism affect soldiery. Scholars historically use the terms “stale-mate”, “attrition,” or “trench-warfare” to describe World War I. Those descriptions are valid for most of the war; however, the initial phase is different. During the first few months, from August through November 1914, World War I is a conflict of mobility. Confusion, mobility, and desperation are present. The time-frame of August—November 1914 allows for a good case-study because it is during this period when World War I is a mobile war, where both the German and Franco-British forces experience advances and retreats.

This work does not concern itself with specific movements, orders, places, leaders, and battles. Other histories detail that aspect of the history. The goal of this work is to describe the “fog of war” that occurred during that fateful period in 1914 “from below.” Relaying the ideas, attitudes, and emotions of the soldiers who fought during this time is the focus. This writing seeks to lift up “the fog of war” and provide a voice for the soldiers who experienced the combat. This is their story.

In essence, the work is divided into three parts. The first two chapters deal with preparation and theory. Chapter One discusses preparation, equipment, and training. It relays the war material available to the British, French, and German armies in 1914 and its potential influence. Similarities involving the experience of war in general are present. How to deal with those obstacles dictates how a soldier performs. In training, the goal is to create the ideal, professional soldier. Chapter Two examines the theories involving nationalism. By establishing that nationalism is real and modern, the case-study of the soldiers of 1914 becomes more
paramount. In addition, different types of nationalism stem from different cultural movements. The chapter also seeks to explain the idea of the existence of British nationalism, or “Britishness.”

Chapters Three and Four consist of empirical evidence focusing on the conscript armies of Germany and France. Both chapters argue how differences in preparation and ideas about the nation resulted in diverging experiences. The chapters argue that nationalism existed for the German and French soldiers when they went to war. The work contends that the ordeal of combat affected those troopers differently. The soldiers’ interaction with civilians receives discussion because nationalism influenced the encounter and the event served as a measuring stick for professionalism.

The last three chapters examine the British soldier. Chapter Five demonstrates that “Britishness” existed within the army. The section argues that minorities within the British army exhibited that nationalist sentiment. Chapter Six examines the trials the British soldiers faced during the early part of the war as well as how they responded to those events. The next chapter, or Chapter Seven, provides examples of the professionalism demonstrated by those soldiers.

However, there are limitations with this work. The empirical evidence on the British soldier outweighs that of the French and German soldier. The reliance on sources is weighted. This dissertation rests on extensive study of primary sources in British archives. Thus, the material on Germany and France is more limited. I have developed the German and French chapters as shadow cases to cast additional light on the specificity of the British experience. I have relied largely on testimonies by German and French soldiers, which have been translated into English and published. My samples have been limited by the editorial decisions of the translators. The German material is particularly limited. Whereas I draw on the testimony of a
wide range of British and French soldiers, with respect to military rank and socio-economic background, my German sample is limited largely to reserve officers, most of whom were university students in civilian life. Tentativeness should accompany any theories based on this limitation.

In addition, the experience of the soldiers pertaining to civilians can also not be treated fairly. One of the issues I explore in this dissertation is the interaction of British, French, and German soldiers with civilians during the initial phase of war. Differences in the context in which these interactions occur make straightforward comparison elusive. The German Army quickly encounters the civilian population of hostile nations in Belgium and northern France. When British forces march through France and Belgium, they encounter the citizens of allied nations. The French do march into German territory in Alsace in the opening campaigns of the war, but the relationship of the civilian population of Alsace to the French and German nations is complex. The Alsatians are not necessarily on good terms with Germany, especially due to both the local government situation and the Saverne Affair.8

Finally, I address wartime experiences of minorities for the British, French, and German armies. Three specific cases receive attention, one for each nation. I use an Irish soldier’s experience for the British nation while two soldiers of Jewish background for the French and German armies. The reason for these particular cases deals with the cultural issues of the time.

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8 After the German annexation of Alsace-Lorraine in 1871, it was placed under the control of the Kaiser himself; therefore, it had no local government of its own. The Saverne (Zabern) Affair in 1913 caused further issues. The event involved members of the German Army insulting Alsatian locals and treating the Alsatians as a conquered territory, disregarding German laws that protected other states in Germany. The Chancellor of Germany, Theobald von Bethmann-Hollweg, supported the army over the Alsatians. For more information, see Richard William Mackey, The Zabern Affair, 1913-1914, (Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1991).
For the British, the Irish question looms large in 1914, given that island’s desire for Home Rule. The Easter Uprising of 1916, a rebellion of the Irish against British control, also factors into this decision. The case of the French Jew stems for the Dreyfus Affair, where a French soldier of Jewish descent receives a prison sentence for a crime he does not commit. Also, the historical presence of anti-Semitism in Europe contributes to this choice. My decision to use a German Jew as a case study for the German Army is influenced by the period of Nazi rule in German history. The extermination of approximately six million Jews during the Holocaust makes this selection self evident. These cases should be treated as cases as opposed to overall experiences of minorities. Other minorities are present, such as Poles in both Germany and Great Britain. Caution should proceed in the formulation of general theories involving one minority case with each army. The reader should be aware of these limitations.

**Historiography: A Study of Soldiers and War**

General histories of World War I provided analysis of the conflict in narrative form. As for the mobile phase of World War I, several historians issued brief commentary on why the

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German advance occurred and why the allied armies regrouped.\textsuperscript{10} John Keegan postulated three themes during this time frame: an impressive quality of the British soldier, the barbarity of the German army in Belgium, and the disorganization of the French army until the Marne.\textsuperscript{11} D. E. Showalter argued that German tactical superiority won the early encounters before the Marne.\textsuperscript{12} Cyril Falls added that despite the fact the French army was in full retreat mode after suffering losses on the frontier, French morale remained firm: “the French were still fighting fit and in fighting mood…”\textsuperscript{13} Keith Robbins supported this idea, stating that while the French soldiers fought bravely in Lorraine, they underestimated the size of the German forces.\textsuperscript{14} The French needed to be brave due to the bright red trousers and blue jackets worn by their infantry, making them easy targets—a fact that cost the French 3\textsuperscript{rd} and 4\textsuperscript{th} Armies nearly three hundred thousand men altogether.\textsuperscript{15} Holger Herwig, examining the First World War from the German perspective,
argued that the allied forces were not the only ones to suffer during their retreat when he wrote, “it was a bloodied and exhausted German Army that reached the Marne.”\textsuperscript{16}

Other scholarship utilized and provided primary accounts to their readers. Select accounts from soldiers, including German, appeared in the war history by Richard Thoumin.\textsuperscript{17} Dominic Hibberd selected a \textit{London Times} dispatch from 30 August 1914 to describe the British force’s engagement with the German army; the dispatch read that the British Expeditionary Force, “…fought its way desperately with many stands, forced backwards and ever backwards by the sheer unconquerable mass of numbers of an enemy prepared to throw away three or four men for the life of every British soldier.”\textsuperscript{18} The dispatch continued, reporting that the British soldiers remained “steady and cheerful,” the German artillery showed accurate range, and the German rifling was less than stellar.\textsuperscript{19} John Buchan involved personal accounts to a degree in his World War I work.\textsuperscript{20} Gerard J. De Groot followed suit.\textsuperscript{21} Martin Gilbert displayed several accounts from the British soldier, demonstrating the steadfast quality they possessed.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{16} Herwig, \textit{The First World War}, 100.
\item \textsuperscript{17} See Thoumin, \textit{The First World War}.
\item \textsuperscript{18} Hibberd, 46–7.
\item \textsuperscript{19} Ibid., 46–7.
\item \textsuperscript{20} See Buchan, \textit{A History of the First World War}.
\item \textsuperscript{21} See De Groot, \textit{The First World War}.
\item \textsuperscript{22} Gilbert, 55–70.
\end{itemize}
Scholarship involving war planning, preparation, and the outbreak existed. One seminal work in this field was the criticism of the Schlieffen Plan by Gerhard Ritter, where he pointed out inherent flaws within the plan itself, thus causing its failure. Ritter’s findings even changed historian B. H. Liddell Hart’s interpretation of the plan, and Hart wrote the forward to Ritter’s work.

Works focusing more specifically on the mobile phase of the war traditionally took the view “from the top,” centered on command and strategy. In these works, a general consensus suggested that the French army was ill-prepared. John Terraine followed this path in his description of the British retreat to the Marne. In the work of Sewel Tyng, the early success of the German army was due simply to it being better than the British and French armies in

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25 For Hart’s earlier endorsement of the plan, see Hart, The Real War 1914-1918, 45.

26 John Terraine, Mons: The Retreat to Victory, (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1960). Terraine provided accounts of Joseph Joffre, French Army Commander, who faulted French military leadership for the shortcomings of the early phase of war; an example of this occurs on page 121.
virtually every way. 27 He suggested, “The German army enjoyed a significant advantage over their principal adversary, the French, in the quality of the troops that constituted their first line of defence;” he also suggested that the French army suffered from other issues: older soldiers, poor cavalry practices, and a stubborn adherence to the offensive. 28 J. M. Winter expanded on these ideas, arguing that because Germany had a male population almost three times that of France, Germany could afford to be selective. 29 Winter also demonstrated that French High Command calculated approximately ten percent of the conscripted men would fail to report for duty; to the credit of the French conscripts, only one percent failed to show. 30 Douglas Porch offered one explanation as to why the French reeled during the initial fighting at the Battle of the Frontiers when he argued that the radicals within the French government prior to the war deserved a share of the blame for the army’s shortcomings on training and leadership. 31

Henri Isselin postulated a less condemning view of the French army. 32 He argued that the French soldiers achieved local successes during the initial campaigns, with fighting at Guise (29-30 August) serving as an example. Isselin also suggested that the French and British soldiers


28 Ibid.


30 Ibid., 116. Winter also provides an example, on page 121, of a small platoon of French, who during their “baptism by fire,” flee the scene.


performed well during the trying retreat, and he incorporated several accounts of French soldiers into his narrative history. He also included a German account that showed fleeting remorse for burning down villages and shooting civilians.33

During and after the war, noncombatant observers published their memoirs and recollections.34 Active combatants and military leaders also contributed to the scholarship, but their view came “from the top.”35 Active combatants viewing the war “from below” saw their work published, if they survived the war. They portrayed the war in its truest sense, and their contribution to the literature remained important. British combatants saw their experiences appear in published form.36 The literature for the French army was rich.37 Publishers contributed to the availability of literature for the German soldier as well.38

33 Ibid., 53-4.
The move toward utilizing personal accounts of the combatants of World War I to weave its story was significant. John Keegan influenced the decision, when he focused on trying to describe the experience of war rather than the war “from above.” 39 For World War I, Lyn


MacDonald intertwined the accounts of soldiers into narrative or edited works.\textsuperscript{40}  Trevor Wilson also relayed the story of World War I through the eyes of the combatants.\textsuperscript{41}  David Ascoli and Richard Holmes detailed the British experience during this period surrounding the Battle of the Marne, and they included accounts of the involved soldiers into their histories.\textsuperscript{42}  Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau described the French experience, suggesting that the French soldiers maintained national sentiment throughout the course of the war.\textsuperscript{43}  Jean Norton examined the accounts of French soldiers to verify accuracy.\textsuperscript{44}

Comparative projects added to the dimension. Jay Winter helped set the table, examining the experiences of the all people involved in the war.\textsuperscript{45}  He also contributed to Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee’s edited work, which addressed the relationship of the state to war and


\textsuperscript{42} See David Ascoli, The Mons Star, (London: Harrap, 1981) and Richard Holmes, Riding the Retreat, (London: Jonathan Cape, 1995). Holmes’s accounts are more plentiful, utilizing unpublished resources, some of which are from the Imperial War Museum.

\textsuperscript{43} See Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau, Men at War 1914-1918: National Sentiment and Trench Journalism in France during the First World War, Helen McPhail, translator, (Providence: Berg, 1992).


\textsuperscript{45} See Winter, The Experience of World War I.
soldiers’ notions of identity. Winter, along with Jean-Louis Robert continued this comparative
d history pursuit in their collaborative effort comparing Paris, London, and Berlin’s role during the
war as well as the role the war played on them. Winter and Antoine Prost examined the
historiography of World War I literature (and even media), comparing British, French, and
German scholars as well. Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker also analyzed the
scope of World War I, examining the scholarship and trends. Their “raison d’être” for the work
was “to offer a way to understand the Great War.” In that understanding, culture played no
small role: “On all sides, nineteenth-century Social Darwinism was at work: racism, ethnic and
social contempt, hygienics were activated, and then poisoned, consciously or unconsciously,
people’s ways of representing the conflict.” The authors continued expressing the importance of
culture, writing,

In short, we can speak of a 1914-1918 war culture, in other words, a collection of
representation of the conflict that crystallised into a system of thought which gave the
war its deep significance. One cannot dissociate this ‘culture’ from the emergence of a
powerful hatred of the opponent. Deep down, the 1914-1918 war culture harboured a
true drive to ‘exterminate’ the enemy.

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46 See Frans Coetzee and Marilyn Shevin-Coetzee, eds., Authority, Identity and the

47 See Jay Winter and Jean-Louis Robert, eds., Capital Cities at War: Paris, London,

48 See Jay Winter and Antoine Prost, The Great War in History: Debates and

49 Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau and Annette Becker, 14-18 Understanding the Great War,

50 Ibid., 49.

51 Ibid., 102-3.
Another dimension of their work involved the extremity of the war’s violence and horror, which previous scholarship may have overlooked.

Examining the micro-histories appeared to be the trend of recent scholarship. The mobile phase of World War I was a snippet of the history of the Great War. Comparing the influence of nationalism within this window would aid the field. How differences in training, equipment, and ideas about the nation influenced the British, French, and German soldiers in 1914 could further scholarship. Understanding the importance of training and equipment could aid future armies going to war. Appreciating the differing types of nationalism and how that translated to war also seemed relevant.

Jared Diamond expounded the theory that environment shapes the course of history. Environment and culture were interconnected. According to historian John Keegan, warfare was a reflection of culture. Modris Eksteins discussed the role of culture when he argued the link of between World War I and the culture that emerged, suggesting the soldiers who fought became the agents for the modern world. Victor Davis Hanson concurred with this theory. Other authors reiterated or suggested Keegan’s central idea, whether the focus was on German

52 For more information on recent scholarship, see Belinda Davis, “Experience, Identity, and Memory: The Legacy of World War I,” Journal of Modern History 75 (2003), 1: 111-31.

53 This, of course, was not to suggest that the author endorsed warfare or militarism.


soldiers in World War II or samurai in Medieval Japan. The equipment, training, and ideas about the nation all reflected the culture of 1914. A micro-history on this topic supported the notion that warfare and culture were interconnected.

For historian and philosopher Robin George Collingwood (1889-1943), recognizing the ideas behind the actions allowed historians to understand history itself. Collingwood suggested historians required the ability to use “a priori imagination” to understand the content matter. He wrote,

The historian’s picture of his subject, whether that subject be a sequence of events or a past state of things, thus appears as a web of imaginative construction stretched between certain fixed points provided by the statements of his authorities; and if these points are frequent enough and the threads spun from each to the next are constructed with due care, always by the a prior imagination and never by merely arbitrary fancy, the whole picture is constantly verified by appeal to these data, and runs little risk of losing touch with the reality which it represents.

Thus, historical knowledge required an examination of ideas behind the actions of history. The written word of the people involved in the historical event allowed that to occur. By examining the words, or ideas, of the combatants on the western front of 1914, a tapestry of the experience ensued. The tapestry demonstrated that differences in training, equipment, and ideas about the nation resulted in diverging experiences for the British, French, and German soldiers in 1914.

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60 Ibid., 242.
CHAPTER ONE

THE CULTURE OF PREPARATION AND SOLDIERY

The “French army no good…, English army too damn good shot.”\(^1\) The German infantry “were as disciplined and orderly as anything ever seen.”\(^2\) These statements, recorded by British soldiers, came from a wounded German enemy and British regular respectively. The general consensus on the quality of soldiery suggested that the British and German soldiers were superior to the French. World War I histories alluded to this point. To these historians, the Germans were successful in the west up to the Battle of the Marne for two reasons. There were not enough British soldiers to stop them, and there was not enough \textit{esprit de corps} in the French army.\(^3\) This was a repeating idea in the histories of that epic clash in 1914.

Yet, there was more to the story. Differences in equipment and training contributed to the experience of the British, German, and French soldiers. Those variables produced an unlevel playing field. The initial phase of World War I proved crucial in determining the outcome between the German forces and the Franco-British forces.\(^4\) What transpired was the ruination of plans—both France’s Plan VXII and Germany’s Schlieffēn Plan. Thus, a return to how those three armies’ soldiers performed merited assessment.

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3. \textit{Esprit de corps} typically refers to solidarity, or the cohesion of a unit.

4. I use the term “Franco-British” rather than “Anglo-French” due to the term “Anglo” referring to English, thus excluding the Scottish and Welsh. I also include the Irish in this term, though this may be a misnomer, thus my apologies to the Irish for mislabeling them. As we shall see, this is a British army, not an English one.
The German army possessed an edge in equipment that proved advantageous during the initial period of the war. The British suffered from lack of numbers while the French suffered from geography, population, and a misguided notion of how to attack. Debate existed amongst military scholars whether or not good soldiery was even a necessity for success on the battlefield. In the end, the soldiers influenced the outcome of war. The training of soldiers proved crucial because all soldiers faced similar obstacles during combat, and how they coped dictated their effectiveness. Many theories existed on this subject of training, but there was only partial to no agreement on the topic. One common theme, however, was the influence of camaraderie. Military science could help understand what transpired during that infamous summer in 1914.

As earlier mentioned, the Germans advanced against the Franco-British forces only to be repelled at the Marne River. It was the Franco-British forces’ turn to advance, but by the end of November 1914, a stalemate ensued. So what happened? Why were the French thrown back initially? The French retreat forced the British Expeditionary Force to fall back as well because, if it did not, the German army would outflank and probably destroy it with superior numbers. Why were the German soldiers so successful in this initial engagement? Was the reason because the French soldiers were of lesser quality than the Germans? Most contemporaries, according to military writer S.L.A. Marshall, said yes: “On the Continent, the French Army was rated in quality and fighting power second only to the German. It had military ardor, great dash, and utmost confidence in its own moral superiority.”\(^5\)Though the view of the French soldier seemed positive, the perception of the German soldier proved better. Lord Kitchener, member of the British War Cabinet, was more critical regarding the French army, seriously doubting the

reliability of the French due to their loss in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1. Still, with the weaponry at the time appearing to favor the defensive, the retreat by the Franco-British force was interesting, to say the least. Why were the French forces able to regroup and halt the German advance? Why were the Germans able to regroup after their retreat from the Marne? The answers were allusive, but numbers and firepower played no small role.

**Math and Fire**

Was the outcome of war simply a matter of numbers? If Army A possessed a larger number of troops than Army B, would Army A automatically win? The B.E.F. faced this disadvantage in numbers, as the *London Times* reported on August 30, 1914: “The broken army [B.E.F.] fought its way desperately with many stands, forced backwards and ever backwards by the sheer unconquerable mass of numbers of an enemy prepared to throw away three or four men for the life of every British soldier.”7 Thus, despite the quality of the regular soldiers within the ranks of the B.E.F., its size was a huge disadvantage for the allied forces.

As for France, the situation was the reverse. Its pursuit of a mass army allegedly compromised the quality of its soldiers. This occurred with Germany as well, but to a lesser degree because of a large base population. Germany, because of its larger population, only accepted fifty to fifty-five percent of men reaching military age.8 Germany also kept the men in

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7 Hibberd, 46.

8 Tyng, 24.
some sort of military service until the age of forty-five. France, due to its smaller population in comparison with Germany, had no choice but to accept seventy-eight to eighty-two percent of eligible men and keep them in some type of military capacity until the age of forty-eight. The usual argument was the younger the male, the better the fighter. This seemed to provide the Germans the advantage, as historian Sewell Tyng suggested that the, “German army enjoyed a significant advantage over their principal adversary, the French, in quality of the troops that constituted their first line of defence.” Further investigation, however, questioned this notion. The Stouffer et al study argued, “…the older men, and the married men tend to get the better performance ratings.” Thus, if numbers indicated success, then there was an even playing field.

Germany, however, had the opportunity to increase its army size by up to three hundred thousand men in 1912-3, but the Prussian War Ministry actually opposed this, fearing it would undermine the “social cohesion and political reliability of the officer corps.” Instead, the German army allowed an increase of 135,000 new officers and men. For the Germans, numbers did not necessarily equal success. This idea further developed when the German army followed

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10 Tyng, 24.

11 Ibid.


the Schlieffen Plan, though its army size actually conflicted with the logistics of the plan. Historian Martin van Crevald made this point when he argued, “the sheer size and weight of the German Army in 1914 proved wholly out of proportion to the means of tactical transportation at its disposal.”¹⁴ Thus, numbers were not necessarily paramount to success on the battlefield. Other factors were at play.

Artillery was a factor. A popular phrase for gun advocates in recent years went something like this: “guns don’t kill people; people kill people.” Yet, guns, and the type of guns, really made it easier, did it not? Artillery fire in World War I made it easier. As historian Stig Forster noted, “Men now battle machines; combat became anonymous; new weapons of mass destruction… were used for the first time….⁰¹⁵ World War I developed into the largest scaled industrialized conflict the world had ever seen. Weapons became fierce machines of destruction. Rifles, by 1914, were effective over a mile, and they could fire over twelve rounds per minute from magazines.¹⁶ Furthermore, machine guns evolved into a much more reliable weapon compared with previous years when they often jammed.

The destructive effect of this technology on soldiers was horrendous. One British General De Negrier, in his “Lessons from the South African War,” wrote, “The demoralizing power of quick-firing rifles and smokeless powder produces more and more effect on the enemy

¹⁴ Martin van Crevald, Supplying the War: Logistics from Wallenstein to Patton. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 140-1, as cited in Herwig, “Dynamics of Necessity,” 93.


in direct proportion to the courage and coolness of the combatant.”\textsuperscript{17} Besides General De Negrier, few realized the carnage that was about to transpire in 1914. Historian Dennis E. Showalter, brought up this point, writing,

armies confronted the prospect of casualties so overwhelming as to make combat impossible and victory meaningless. One often-cited way they met the challenge was by emphasizing moral factors-in the nation as well as the regiment. The limitations of this approach are so obvious that its innovative nature has been correspondingly overlooked. Victory in Western war had historically depended on training, discipline, and experience.\textsuperscript{18}

S. L. A. Marshall reiterated this notion when he wrote, “… it is unfortunately the case that the masses of men are not capable of taking other than a superficial judgment on the effect of new weapons.”\textsuperscript{19} Military historian John Ellis agreed. To him, the machine gun,

gave an overwhelming advantage to the defensive and made a complete nonsense of both sides’ visions of what a major European conflict would be like. They, together with adroitly handled rifles, played a part in halting the initial German thrust. They were even more instrumental in bringing the Allies to a grinding halt when they in turn attempted to drive the Germans back.\textsuperscript{20}

The machine gun struck fear into the hearts of the enemy, as one anonymous French officer discussed while in the Argonne Forest:

I know of nothing more depressing in the mist of battle-when there is nothing but noise and tumult, confusion and disharmony around us-than the steady tac-tac-tac-tac of that deadly weapon. It spreads suffering in a precise and methodic fashion. The emotions of the gunner behind it never hinder its evil effects. There appears to be nothing material to

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{17} Charles Young, \textit{Military Morale of Nations and Races}, (Kansas City: Franklin Hudson Publishing, 1912), 16.
\bibitem{18} Showalter, “Mass Warfare and the impact of Technology,” 77-8.
\end{thebibliography}
its working. It seems to be dominated and directed by some powerful, scheming spirit of destruction.\(^{21}\)

The technological advances of gunnery seemingly caused all other variables to appear obsolete.

Massed gunnery, however, was not perfect. “For much of the war artillery lacked the ability to find enemy targets, to hit them accurately, and to destroy them effectively.”\(^{22}\) Even if this technological fire did not hit a soldier, however, it still had its effects. At the Battle of Mons, Private Jack of the B.E.F.’s 4/Middlesex brought this up, stating, “When the firing began, I was frightened by the noise. I’d never heard anything like it. Most of the shells were bursting well behind us, but there was also a strange whistling sound as the bullets came over.”\(^{23}\) A German officer at the Battle of Le Cateau recalled the ferocity of artillery fire: “I did not think it possible that flesh and blood could survive so great an onslaught. Our men attacked with the utmost determination, but again and again they were driven back…. Regardless of loss, the English artillery… kept up a devastating fire.”\(^{24}\) Former military attaché for the United States in Monrovia, Liberia and military writer Charles Young theorized these ideas before the war:

> Under fire for a long time, even men who have not been actively engaged are subjected to a mental strain or tension which destroys nervous energy and produces physical weakness and weariness at times so great as to render them incapable of any exertion or movement whatever.\(^{25}\)


\(^{23}\) Ascoli, 63.

\(^{24}\) Ibid., 100.

\(^{25}\) Young, 16.
Not only did this advanced gunnery generate exhaustion, but it also caused depression, as General De Negrier noted: “With the new weapons this tension is more severe than it used to be, and the corresponding depression is increased in direct proportion.”

The technological advances in weaponry also caused a dilemma. Military scientists Roger A. Beaumont and William P. Snyder argued that, “…greater dispersion and individual initiative was essential for battlefield effectiveness and survival; these, in turn eroded linearity and cohesiveness.” Thus, in order to effectively combat advanced fire, units needed to disperse, which harmed the cohesion of the unit in question. Advanced gunnery, therefore, created a shattering effect, breaking up the very component that so many of the military scientists argued was essential for effective soldiery: cohesion. It seemed that advanced gunnery had the final say, according to these mass-fire writers.

Did artillery have the final say in 1914? Mass-fire advocates believed yes. They concluded that Germany achieved its initial success because of its advantage in mass-fire. Despite the regard with which people held the French army, the Germans possessed an advantage in artillery. France’s army possessed the 75-mm. gun, which was supposedly the finest quick-firing light field piece on earth. There were, however, two problems with this notion. The German army possessed as many 75 mm and 77 mm caliber guns as the French

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26 Ibid.


28 Marshall, World War I, 45.
possessed the 75-mm guns.\textsuperscript{29} Also, each German army could deploy over four thousand of the 75 and 77 mm. guns.\textsuperscript{30} Every German infantry division contained twelve more of these guns than a French infantry division, causing a seventy-two to sixty advantage between divisions.\textsuperscript{31} Germany had an advantage over the French here, but its advantage went further. Both the 75 and 77 mm. guns’ shells on both sides were too light, thus causing less damage than desired.

Regarding medium to heavy cannon, the French army possessed approximately three hundred pieces. Germany, on the other hand, possessed thirty-five hundred pieces, with each of its armies containing thirty-six 105 mm. howitzers and sixteen 150 mm. howitzers.\textsuperscript{32} As historian Douglas Porch noted, “The French Army proved to be among the most technologically backward in Europe in 1914. Apart from the redoubtable 75-mm cannon, it was deficient in almost every other category of military hardware, but especially cumbersome and lacked a magazine.”\textsuperscript{33} S. L. A. Marshall also noted the German advantage, arguing, “This disparity in firepower, unit for unit, was the consequence of the French General Staff’s own mistaken doctrine. It was truly believed that, in combat, moral superiority would outweigh advantage in firepower.”\textsuperscript{34} Was this belief a legacy from France’s greatest general, Napoleon Bonaparte? In war, Napoleon argued


\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{32} Marshall, \textit{World War I}, 112.


\textsuperscript{34} Marshall, \textit{World War I}, 46.
that moral factors outnumbered material ones by a ratio of three to one. Napoleon, however, fought in the nineteenth century, not the twentieth. Gunnery evolved. Marshall, a great advocate for effective soldiery, even conceded that gunnery imbalance affected the success of armies. He further argued that the British suffered from this disparity. Each division of the British Expeditionary Force possessed only four 60 pound (5-inch) guns. Historians Allan R. Millett, Williamson Murray, and Kenneth H. Watman, however, argued the British actually made good use of their artillery. They believed the British utilized their artillery well while on the defensive:

In 1914, the integration of army and artillery was generally good, although because of a lack of communication systems the artillery often had to support the infantry by remaining within sight. While effective in the defensive battles of 1914, the cooperation proved very costly to Royal Artillery batteries that operated in the open, directly exposed to German counterbattery fire.

The problem with artillery communication was not a unique thing for just the B.E.F., as all involved countries suffered from this.

In terms of machine guns, the sides were fairly even. Each infantry battalion or cavalry regiment of the B.E.F. possessed two machine guns. France, however, resisted the implementation of the machine gun, not adopting it until 1910. One French general even made

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35 Ibid., 53.


37 Ibid.

38 For more information on this idea, see Keegan, The First World War.


40 Ellis, 113.
the comment that the machine gun “makes no difference at all.”\textsuperscript{41} By 1914, the French possessed no more than twenty-five hundred machine guns. The German army actually entered the war with the same proportion of machine guns to infantry as the British, but the Germans gave the impression that more machine guns were present due to their way of organizing machine gunners into companies.\textsuperscript{42}

Attire also aided the German. The German soldier sported grey uniforms which seemed to blend in to the background, especially at dawn and dusk. The attire of grey made a lasting impression on Richard Harding Davis, a reporter for the New York \textit{Tribune},

The grey of the uniforms worn by both officers and men helped this air of mystery. Only the sharpest eye could detect among the thousands that passed the slightest difference. All moved under a cloak of invisibility….. That it was selected to clothe and disguise the German when he fights is typical of the German staff in striving for efficiency to leave nothing to chance, to neglect no detail.

After you have seen this service uniform under conditions entirely opposite you are convinced that for the German soldier it is his strongest weapon. Even the most expert marksman cannot hit a target he cannot see. It is a grey green, not the blue grey of our Confederates. It is the grey of the hour just before daybreak, the grey of unpolished steel, of mist among green trees.

I saw it first in the Grand Place in front of the Hôtel de Ville. It was impossible to tell if in that noble square there was a regiment or a brigade. You saw only a fog that melted into the stones, blended with the ancient house fronts, that shifted and drifted, but left you nothing at which you could point.

Later, as the army passed below my window, under the trees of the Botanical Park, it merged and was lost against the green leaves. It is no exaggeration to say that at a hundred yards you can see the horses on which the uhlans ride, but you cannot see the men who ride them.

If I appear to overemphasize this disguising uniform it is because of all the details of the German outfit it appealed to me as one of the most remarkable. The other day when I was with the rearguard of the French Dragoons and Cuirassiers and they threw out pickets, we could distinguish them against the yellow wheat or green gorse at half a mile,

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid.

while these men passing in the street, when they have reached the next crossing, become merged into the grey of the paving stones and the earth swallows them.\textsuperscript{43}

Though the British abandoned their red-coats for khaki grey attire, the French stayed with tradition. This was not the best decision. The red and blue uniforms of the French Army had an unfortunate tendency to attract the attention of enemy rifle-men.\textsuperscript{44}

There were other technological advances as well, but these actually showed the advantage to be on the side of the Franco-British forces. In terms of aircraft, the French possessed a huge advantage over the Germans: three hundred ninety versus one hundred.\textsuperscript{45} The French carried two hundred thirty four pilots to Germany’s ninety.\textsuperscript{46} In addition, the British contributed an additional sixty-three aircraft to the allied air advantage.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, the Germans did not even possess enough motorized vehicles in 1914 to carry out the Schlieffen Plan.\textsuperscript{48} Though Germany fell behind in terms of airplanes and pilots compared to the western allies, airplanes and pilots were not difference makers in 1914. Artillery and the incorporation of the machine-gun were. Despite the lack of motorized vehicles for the Schlieffen Plan, the German advantage in terms of equipment proved beneficial.


\textsuperscript{44} Porch, “The French Army…,” 212.

\textsuperscript{45} Herwig, “The Dynamics of Necessity…,” 85.

\textsuperscript{46} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{47} Marshall, World War I, 53.

\textsuperscript{48} Herwig, “The Dynamics of Necessity…,” 85.
So was the need for effective soldiery even necessary with the advent of these weapons of destruction? Military writer John Ellis blatantly argued no. He theorized that despite the effectiveness of a soldier, artillery power decided the outcome: “The most effective riflemen in the world are simply no match for large numbers of machine guns, even indifferently handled. This potential gulf in firepower became even more marked as the BEF began to sustain heavy casualties….”

An unknown British regular reiterated this idea when he wrote, “I am the only one left out of my battery; we were blown to pieces by the enemy on Wednesday at Le Cateau…. I have nothing; only the jacket I stand up in-no boots or puttees, as I was left for dead.”

Historian S. L. A. Marshall disagreed with Ellis’s notion that gunnery had the final say. Marshall argued that, “despite the use of fire power, it is the masses of men who fight on foot which brings the ultimate clash for victory.” For him, the advance of weaponry demanded an even higher quality of soldiery. Better-trained men would bring about the “increase [in] the ratio of effective fire.” Weapons did not fire themselves in World War I: the better the soldier; the better the fire. Captain E. W. Hamilton of the BEF’s 11th Hussars recorded how good soldiery overcame the machine during an encounter with a machinegun in a wood:

> From this wood a German machinegun began playing on the ranks of the battalion with such disastrous accuracy that it soon became clear that either the machine gun must be silenced or the position evacuated. [A] Pte. [Private] Wilson thought the former

49 Ellis, 120.


51 Marshall, Men Against Fire, 19.

52 Ibid., 22.

53 Ibid., 23.
alternative preferable, and, getting a K.R.R. [King’s Royal Rifles] man to go with him, crept out towards the wood. The K.R.R. man was shot almost at once, but, quite undeterred, Wilson went on alone, killed the German officer and six men, and single-handedly captured the machine gun and two and a half cases of ammunition. It need scarcely be said that he got the Victoria Cross.54

Good soldiery, thus, still proved to be a valuable commodity in war, and the British regulars had a knack for demonstrating this quality. British regulars could fire thirty shots into one target within a minute.55 They were so effective, that many Germans actually thought each British soldier had his own machine gun.56

Military writer Charles Young also argued for the importance of soldiery, regardless of advanced in gunnery:

History shows that for every improvement in armament, for every death-dealing device, the ingenuity of man has invented an adequate defense of some kind or other against it; so that with all the improvements in arms and ammunition, the troops of the opposing lines come just as close to one another as previously, if definite results are to follow.57

Marshall and Young were not alone in their assessment. Military psychiatrist Richard A. Gabriel joined their cause, stating “technology, no matter how destructive or sophisticated, has yet to succeed in replacing the human element in achieving success on the field of battle.”58 For these three writers, the soldier still decided battle.

54 Hamilton, The First Seven Divisions, 386.

55 Ellis, 120.

56 This is actually a reoccurring notion among German prisoners who were captured by the British in the beginning of World War I.

57 Young, 16.

Thus, the trooper was more than a mere pawn on war’s chessboard. The variations in equipment influenced the British, French, and German soldiers’ experience of war differently. The German army possessed an advantage here. Yet, despite the material, numerical, and organizational advantages maintained by the Germany army compared to its western opponents, soldiery still played a role in the war. That role depended on how the combatants overcame the obstacles of war.

**Though this was madness, was there method in it?**

Soldiers faced other obstacles besides mass numbers or advanced gunnery. As Richard A. Gabriel argued,

> One of the most important measures of an army’s combat effectiveness is how well its soldiers endure the storm of horror that washes over them in the sea of battle. To the individual soldier all war is small war comprised of hundreds of small-unit engagements in which the ability of individual soldiers to withstand the tress of battle is crucial to the unit’s success or failure.⁵⁹

Some obstacles had less to do with the enemy and more to do with the situation in which the soldier found himself. Physical exhaustion was quite normal for soldiers, especially during the initial weeks of World War I when they marched constantly. One Irish regular in the B.E.F., John F. Lucy, noted how exhaustion affected his brother:

> One day he alarmed me, after a long period of silence, by remarking casually: ‘One more turn to the left now, at the top of Tawnyey’s Hill, and we’re home, my lad.’ As he spoke a halt was called, and he bumped helplessly into the man in front and woke up. He stoutly denied having spoken, and then I knew that he had been asleep on the march.⁶⁰

For any of the soldiers, sleepwalking was not abnormal by any means during this period.

Captain C. A. L. Brownlow of the B.E.F. shared a similar experience:

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⁵⁹ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁰ Lucy, 149.
Of the rest of the night I have no clear recollection; it remains in my mind as a blurred nightmare, in which shadowy figures slept as they rode or slept as they walked, in which phantom teams halted in sleep, checking for miles a ghostly stream of men and in which the will more than ever wrestled with the desire to sleep.61

The Germans also walked, per chance to dream, as Stephen Westman of the German 113th Infantry Regiment wrote, “‘We slogged on… living, as it were, in a coma, often sleeping whilst we marched, and when the column came to a sudden halt we ran with our noses against the billycans of the men in front of us.’”62

Obviously, the main reasons for exhaustion were lack of sleep and food, but the elements also caused this physical state. Darkness, dampness, and heat all contributed to exhaustion.63 As the anonymous French soldier noticed, “Rain frequently increased our fatigue.”64 And with that exhaustion, problems aside from dreariness and sleepwalking occurred. According to military writer Richard Grossman, exhaustion caused normal bodily functions to shut down in order to conserve energy. Digestion, bladder control, and even sphincter control could stop in order for the soldier to continue his endeavor.65 There was also a link between physical exhaustion and mental breakdown, according to psychologist F. C. Bartlett. He argued, “There is perhaps no

62 Ibid.
63 Holmes, Acts of War, 71-3.
64 Bertrand, 57, as cited in Thoumin, 90.
general condition which is more likely to produce a large crop of nervous and mental disorders than a state of prolonged and great fatigue."66

The interesting thing about the exhaustion factor was that it possibly served as a measuring stick for effective soldiery. Early French fighting reports made this connection: “Early battle reports in 1914 speak of declining combat efficiency, of men simply exhausted from marching and countermarching, sleeping in the open air, and being inadequately supplied, before being hurled into battle."67 Could there be a correlation with exhaustion and the German stall at the Marne River? The German 1st and 2nd Armies covered three hundred miles during its advance.68 Yet, the French and British also marched while retreating, covering up to two hundred miles, and that is not counting the march going forward which preceded the retreat. The Franco-British forces were able to regroup, despite exhaustion. Did that mean the Franco-British forces demonstrated better soldiery than the German soldiers? Richard Holmes also argued a link existed between combat efficiency and exhaustion.69 To him, a combat soldier peaked at maximum efficiency from day fifteen through day twenty-four of active duty. From there, the soldier slowly lost his efficiency. By day thirty-eight, the soldier developed combat exhaustion and hyperactivity. By day fifty, he developed emotional exhaustion, and by day fifty-five, the fighter fell into a vegetative state. Was Richard Holmes impersonating Sherlock Holmes? The historian discovered something here. German troops on the right flank invaded Belgium on 3 August, so by the time they reached the Marne River, they endured over thirty days of combat.

68 Holmes, Acts of War, 115.
69 Ibid., 214.
The French did not enter into combat until 14 August, while the British began on 23 August.\textsuperscript{70}

Still, the Germans, despite longer exposure to combat, eventually regrouped after the retreat from the Battle of the Marne to end the allied counterattack. Despite these hardships suffered by the soldiers, the majority rarely succumbed to these obstacles. “Every man has his breaking point, but most never reach it. Although the cumulative strain of battle will ultimately overwhelm even the most resolute, the majority of soldiers are never stretched to the snapping point.”\textsuperscript{71}

Already facing advanced gunnery and physical obstacles, soldiers also faced psychological obstacles as well. The stresses of war had its impact on the soldiers, including their psyche. The Stouffer \textit{et al} study developed a list of several types of stress that arose from combat:

1. Threats to life and limb and health.
2. Physical discomfort-from lack of shelter, excessive heat or cold, excessive moisture or dryness, inadequacy of food or water or clothing; from insects and disease; from filth; from injuries or wounds; from long-continued fatigue and lack of sleep.
3. Deprivation of sexual concomitant social satisfactions.
4. Isolation from accustomed sources of affectional assurance.
5. Loss of comrades, and sight and sound of wounded and dying men.
6. Restriction of personal movement-ranging from the restrictions of military law to the immobility of the soldier pinned down under enemy fire.
7. Continual uncertainty and lack of adequate cognitive orientation.
8. Conflicts of values
   a. between the requirements of duty and the individual’s impulses toward safety and comfort
   b. between military duty and obligations to family and dependents at home, to whose well-being the soldier’s survival is important
   c. between informal group codes, as of loyalty to comrades, and the formal requirements of the military situation which may sometimes not permit mutual aid
   d. between previously accepted moral codes and combat imperatives.
9. Being treated as a means rather than an end in oneself; seemingly arbitrary and impersonal demands of coercive authority; sense of not counting as an individual.

\textsuperscript{70} Part of the French 1st Army actually entered combat by 9 August at Mulhouse, on the border with Alsace.

\textsuperscript{71} Holmes, \textit{Acts of War}, 223.
10. Lack of “privacy”; the incessant demands and petty irritations of close link within the group.
11. Long periods of enforced boredom, mingled with anxiety, between actions.
12. Lack of terminal individual goals; poverty and uncertainty of individual rewards.⁷²

One example of both points 4 and 5 from the Stouffer et al list came from a description by a King’s Liverpool Regiment sergeant in the British army. The sergeant recorded on September 8, 1914,

The most awful day I have had. Shells bursting on all sides, bullets within a foot. Before entering firing line prayed and had a look at [a photograph of] Flo… I was in charge of the burial party. Terrible sights. Jakes had to be picked up in pieces and buried in a ground sheet.⁷³

Still, despite all of the aforementioned stresses stemming from combat, soldiers continued fighting.

Writer David Grossman also took note of the psychological problems that could develop among even the toughest soldiers. First of all, there were “fatigue cases.”

This state of physical and mental exhaustion is one of the earliest symptoms. Increasingly unsociable and overly irritable, the soldier loses interest in all activities with comrades and seeks to avoid any responsibility or activity involving physical or mental effort. He becomes prone to crying fits or fits of extreme anxiety or terror. There will also be such somatic symptoms as hypersensitivity to sound, increased sweating, and palpitations. Such fatigue cases set the stage for further and more complete collapse. If the soldier is forced to remain in combat, such collapse becomes inevitable; the only real cure is evacuation and rest.⁷⁴

Soldiers tired! This was not an epiphany, considering the amount of effort, both physically and mentally. Combine that with stress from loud noises and from facing death, fatigue occurred

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⁷² Stouffer et al, 77.


⁷⁴ Grossman, 45.
indeed. The issue, however, was that it did not stop there, but rather could turn into a state of confusion.

Fatigue can quickly shift into the psychotic dissociation from reality that marks confusional states. Usually, the soldier no longer knows who he is. Unable to deal with his environment, he has mentally removed himself from it. Symptoms include delirium, psychotic dissociation, and manic-depressive mood swings. One often noted response is Ganzer syndrome, in which the soldier will begin to make jokes, act silly, and otherwise try to war off the horror with humor and the ridiculous.75

Without rest, the soldier could develop these symptoms, thus reducing the quality of his fighting ability.

There were more types of psychological strains. Conversion hysteria was another of these hindrances to effective soldiery. With this mental state, the soldier many not know where he is or how to function. He could develop a disregard for danger or amnesia. The soldier may even suffer from convulsive attacks, partial paralysis-usually on his shooting arm, and even hysteria.76 One occurrence of this took place during the B.E.F.’s exhausting retreat, as one John Bernard Denore recalled, “During the night a man near me quite suddenly started squealing like a pig, and then jumped out of the trench, ran straight down the hill towards the town, and shot himself through the foot. He was brought in by some artillery-men.”77 Thus, even during this early stage in the Great War, there were psychological issues in play. Normally, this developed during actual combat, but it could also develop years later as a post-traumatic event.

Yet, other mental problems could arise. Soldiers could also suffer from anxiety states. “These states are characterized by feelings of total weariness and tenseness that cannot be

75 Ibid.

76 Ibid., 46-7.

relieved by sleep or rest, degenerating into an inability to concentrate.”78 The affected individual would have nightmares when he did sleep and became fixated with death. This sometimes led to complete hysteria, making the soldier useless to his unit. Obsessive and compulsive states also occurred, where the soldier had uncontrollable stammering, tics, or tremors, thus rendering him unreliable. Sometimes the soldier’s entire personality could actually change due to the strain of war.79

These psychological strains manifested themselves on the battlefield. Wyn Griffith of the B.E.F.’s Royal Welch Fusiliers wrote about this:

There are times when fear drops below the threshold of the mind; never beyond recall, but far enough from the instant to become a background. Moments of great exaltation, of tremendous physical exertion, when activity can dominate over all rivals in the mind, the times of exhaustion that follow these great moments; there are occasions of release from the governance of fear. As I hurried along the lane in the nightmare wood, stepping round the bodies clustered about the shell-holes, here and there helping a wounded man to clamber over a fallen tree-trunk, falling flat on my face when the whistle of an approaching shell grew into a shrieking ‘YOU’, aimed at my ear, to paralyse before it killed, then stumbling on again through a cloud of bitter smoke, I learned that there was another way of making fear a thing of small account.80

A French soldier and his unit either showed great enthusiasm for war or experienced trauma during their baptism by fire on 22 August 1914: “We knew there were some killed in every battle, and yet we were all in such a joyous state of unconcern that we were dumbfounded in presence of this sudden misfortune [being attacked]. I see the smile congeal on the lips of my comrades.81 If this was enthusiasm exuded by the French unit, it quickly dissipated into

78 Grossman, 47.
79 Ibid., 47-8.
80 Keegan and Holmes, 19.
81 Winter, The Experience of World War I, 121.
psychological strain, as the French soldier continued: “I cast a glance at my neighbours; breathless, shaken by nervous tremblings, their mouths are contracted in a hideous grin, their teeth are chattering: their faces convulsed with terror recall the grotesque gargoyles of Notre-Dame.” The young French soldier and his unit demonstrated what would be the reality of World War I. The “tremblings” and “chattering” would continue for other soldiers throughout the war, and the imagery of “grotesque gargoyles” became synonymous with the imagery of the conflict.

These obstacles tried the soul of the soldier. How that soldier responded proved paramount. Not only did the trooper require a sense of professionalism in order to better overcome these impediments, these hardships served as the litmus test in revealing the true experiences of the soldier. The final portion of that litmus test involved the “baptism of fire.” It was only after these trials could the true spirit of the soldier appear, and with that, their true experiences.

**To Fight or Not to Fight**

Why did men even fight? Some, such as regular soldiers, considered fighting just another occupation. “For regular soldiers fighting was a job. As in mining or deep-sea fishing you accepted risks and got paid for taking them.” Fighting was a way of life to these soldiers; it was simply what they did for a living. Ernst Jünger, a highly decorated German soldier from World War I, demonstrated this idea in his writings. He became a very efficient soldier for Germany, and he took pride in being good at his job.

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82 Ibid.
84 See Jünger, *Storm of Steel*. 
Military scientist Martin Van Crevald argued that the answer to why men fight was a bit more internal. “War alone presents man with the opportunity of employing all his faculties, putting everything at risk, and testing his ultimate worth against an opponent as strong as himself.” 85 To Van Crevald, war was a game where the stakes could get no higher. This notion that man possessed an internal attraction to high-stake games of competition was the thesis of his writing. As he continued, “the true essence of war consists not just of one group killing another but of its member’s readiness to be killed in return if necessary.” 86 War was as pricey as a game of Russian Roulette, yet it could be also be a career—an exciting career. “Combat posed a challenge for a man to prove himself to himself and others. Combat was a dare.” 87

Indeed, a desire to fight existed in 1914. Lt. Alan Hanbury of the Royal Berkshires, upon hearing the declaration for war, demonstrated this point:

We’re Regulars, Regulars mobilised, entraining and in damned good spirits at the thought of finding out—if we’re Men…. We’re the lucky ones. We backed the right horse when we chose the army as a career. We’re the best trained army in Europe, about to astound the world with our musketry. We’ll go through the conscript army of Germany like Alexander’s Macedonians through the Persian hordes… 88

He was not alone, as a young Leutnant named Erwin Rommel of the 124th German Infantry Regiment also noted this feeling. “‘All the young faces radiated joy, animation and anticipation,’ he wrote. ‘Is there anything finer than marching against an enemy at the head of

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86 Ibid., 87.

87 Stouffer et al, 131.

88 Keegan and Holmes, 259.
such soldiers.'” 89 Enthusiasm was present. J. W. Winter argued the French military staff expected ten percent of its men would not show up for duty if war occurred. The absentees only amounted to one percent. 90

Yet, Martin Van Crevald’s hypothesis did not universally apply, as fear of failure complicated matters. Christopher Isherwood, who grew up in England during World War I, had mixed emotions about fighting:

Like most of my generation, I was obsessed by a complex of terror and longings connected with the idea ‘War’. War in this purely neurotic sense meant The Test. The test of your courage, your maturity, your sexual prowess; ‘are you really a man?’ Subconsciously, I believe, I longed to be subjected to this test; but I also dreaded failure. I dreaded failure so much—indeed, I was so certain that I should fail—that, consciously, I denied my longing to be tested altogether. 91

The desire to fight conflicted with other desires and emotions, such as pessimism. It varied by degrees with each individual. In Brittany, one person felt that pessimism: “In deathly silence the mayor read our the order for general mobilisation. Then petrified dumbness. Not a voice applauded. Someone sobbed once, and the crowd stirred, and everyone went their various ways home.” 92 This pessimism and worry was not unique, as a veteran of the Boer War, Captain James Jack of the Cameroonians, wrote, “One can scarcely believe that five Great Powers—also styled “civilised”—are at war, and that the original spark causing the conflagration arose from the

89 Ibid.

90 Winter, 116.


92 Keegan and Holmes, 259-60.
murder of one man and his wife. It is quite mad, as well as being quite dreadful… I personally loathe the outlook.”93 Enthusiasm existed for war, but so did hesitation.94

Author Dave Grossman discussed this idea of hesitancy to fight, writing, “Killing is a private, intimate occurrence of tremendous intensity, in which the destructive act becomes psychologically very much like the procreative act.”95 Killing was personal! This was obviously not an epiphany, but Grossman’s words deserved pontification. From this idea, one could hypothesize that killing distance and emotions over the kill were inversely proportional to each other. In other words, would it not be more personal for a soldier killing someone two feet away than a soldier killing someone two hundred feet away? If so, that meant the machinery of war in 1914 depersonalized killing.

In warfare, the soldier did not fight alone. He belonged to a group, and the concept of “group mentality” entered the equation. The group, typically, made it easier for the individual soldier to kill the enemy as long as the rest of the group followed suit. However, if the group dissolved, Grossman argued the individual had a tougher time pulling the trigger. “The defeat of even the most elite group is usually achieved when so many casualties have been inflicted (usually somewhere around the 50 percent point) that the group slips into a form of mass depression and apathy.”96 In other words, a soldier who was part of a group was more likely to kill because he saw the rest of the group killing.

93 Ibid., 260.
94 See Chapters Three, Four, and Six.
95 Grossman, 2.
96 Ibid., 149.
Or did he? Grossman argued that some men were not able to bring themselves to fire. His reasoning involved a belief in humanity: “there is within most men an intense resistance to killing their fellow man. A resistance so strong that, in many circumstances, soldiers on the battlefield will die before they can overcome it.” So what did the soldier do if he could not pull the trigger? The traditional view on this subject involves the “fight-or-flight” dichotomy, but Grossman argued otherwise. For him, the soldier reacted in four distinct ways while under fire. The soldier fought, fled, postured (tried to intimidate with no attempt to harm), or submitted. Thus, not all soldiers fought. Despite training, not every soldier, when faced with the ultimate decision to take human life, would fire his weapon. As military scientist, S. L. A. Marshall, noted:

I well recall that in World War I the great sense of relief that came to troops when they were passed to a quiet sector… was due not so much to the realization that things were safer there as to the blessed knowledge that for a time they were not under the compulsion to take life.

Marshall furthered this idea of refusal to fire in his “ratio of fire” hypothesis. He argued that soldiers fired their weapons with the intention of hitting the enemy less often than what was expected. He suggested,

A commander of infantry will be well advised to believe that when he engages the enemy not more than one quarter of his men will ever strike a real blow unless they are

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97 Ibid., 4. The question here involved how the ideas of the Enlightenment and Age of Reason influenced this notion. As the reader shall see, those ideas, manifested in the rational nationalism of the British, were overcome by the British soldiers.

98 Ibid., 5-7.

99 Marshall, Men Against Fire, 79. This is one of the most influential works on military science, especially due to some of its controversial arguments, which will receive discussion. Marshall is also the author of a general World War I history that receives attention within this work.
compelled by almost overpowering circumstance or unless all junior leaders constantly “ride herd” on troops with the specific mission of increasing their fire.\textsuperscript{100}

Marshall elaborated on this notion: “The 25 per cent estimate stands even for well-trained and campaign-seasoned troops. I mean that 75 per cent will not fire or will not persist in firing against the enemy and his works. These men may face the danger but they will not fight.”\textsuperscript{101} In fact, he argued an average of fifteen percent actually engaged in firing while on the front lines.\textsuperscript{102} Neither battle experience, discipline, nor training factored into a soldier’s desire to fire. Obviously, this hypothesis was quite controversial. At best, only one out of every four soldiers actually fired their weapons with the intention of hitting the enemy, which means that only one out of every four soldiers actually fought. Thus, only one-fourth to one-sixth of an army actually engaged its opponent on the battlefield.

David Grossman backed Marshall’s “ratio of fire” hypothesis. He brought to light several instances of this phenomenon. One alleged example occurred in World War I when Lt. George Roupell said he had to draw his sword and walk down the trench in order to get his men to fire lower instead of in the air.\textsuperscript{103} Another veteran of World War I gave credence to this theory when he discussed “draftees who wouldn’t shoot.”\textsuperscript{104} According to this veteran, the

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{100} Ibid., 50.
  \item \textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 57.
  \item \textsuperscript{103} Grossman, 12. The problem with both Marshall and Grossman’s hypothesis is that neither provide concrete citations as evidence. They both bring examples to their work to support their ideas, but there is no way to follow up to establish this theory definitively. Still, this theory receives large support within the field of military science and deserves consideration.
  \item \textsuperscript{104} Ibid., 27.
\end{itemize}
draftees “thought if they didn’t shoot at the Germans, the Germans wouldn’t shoot at them.”105 In fact, according to Grossman and Marshall, the philosophy of World War I soldiers was, “Let ‘em go; we’ll get ‘em some other time.”106

What made matters worse was the problem of how do you prove or disprove whether or not a soldier shot to kill? Grossman believed that soldiers would not admit to not firing because that would be like a male admitting impotence.107 This was a person who became a soldier, and for him to admit he did not fire his weapon with the intent to hit the enemy would be to admit that he was a failure. The ultimate decision to fire was the decision of the individual, and according to Marshall and Grossman, most individuals would not fire with harm as the intent. Why? There was no clear answer, but military scientists attempt an explanation. “What if there is within each person a force that understands at some gut level that all humanity is inextricably interdependent and that to harm any part is to harm the whole?”108 Arguably, this theory could have some basis in the trench warfare of World War I, when sections of the Franco-British armies had some type of non-firing agreements with sections of the German armies. This “live and let live” did occur during this time of stalemate.109

Yet, as far as the mobile phase of World War in the Fall of 1914, this theory seemed less plausible. Taking this theory into account, how could 12,000 of 80,000 British troops have

105 Ibid.

106 Ibid., 30.

107 Ibid., 33-6. The question still remains how does one prove this?

108 Ibid., 36-7.

halted the German 1st Army of 35,000 (of 160,000) strong at the Battle of Mons, especially considering that even if only 15-25% of German soldiers were shooting to kill, 100% of the German soldiers were trying to advance. Even if most of the German soldiers did not shoot with the intent of hitting the British, they were all still trying to march forward.

If this “ratio of fire” theory was true, what a total waste of manpower for the military and for war. Marshall suggested otherwise, however: “The effect of their presence in the zone of fire is stimulating to their comrades and even may be depressing to the morale of the enemy if it becomes revealed by his reconnaissance. These non-firing soldiers still contributed to the military campaign because soldiers and enemies usually were unaware of this situation. Though not trying to hit the enemy, soldiers might still fire their rifle or act like they were firing their rifle; therefore, comrades and enemies would not know the difference.

Soldiers who were more willing to fight demonstrated lower casualty rates; this was according to a study involving American soldiers after World War II. The academic work established, “beyond reasonable doubt the fact of a tendency for companies with the worse attitudes to have the higher nonbattle casualty rates, and vice versa.” The study explained non-battle casualty rates, but it failed to explain battle casualty rates. With this in mind, there was still reasonable doubt as to whether those units that were willing to fight had lower battle casualty rates. However, the correlation seemed plausible. Better attitudes produced more efficient soldiers. More capable soldiers simply fought better. This demonstrated the importance of training. The differences in training resulted in diverging experiences for the

10 Marshall, Men Against Fire, 64.

11 Stouffer et al, 10-20.

12 Ibid., 12.
British, French, and German soldiers. The better the training meant, in theory, the better the soldier.

If training resulted in effective soldiery, which aspects of the training experience deserved attention. Several theorists presented their answers. As Marshall hinted earlier, support was important. This support led to what armies strive for, that is military cohesion.

**Cohesion and Camaraderie**

How could one define military cohesion? The answer was of paramount importance. French military scientist and officer, Ardant Du Picq, demonstrated attempted an answer: “Four brave men who do not know each other will not dare to attack a lion. Four less brave, but knowing each other well, sure of their reliability and consequently of mutual aid, will attack resolutely.”113 Cohesion and camaraderie were the answers to why men fought, according to Du Picq. Military scientist N. Kinzer Stewart concurred, arguing this idea of unity was necessary to have an effective fighting unit.114 Steward attempted to define the idea of cohesion, or camaraderie, when he described what the ideal fighting unit possessed: “men united for a cause, trusting in each other, and confident in their leaders will be an effective and victorious army. This unity or sense of belonging manifests itself in the elegant phrase, ‘esprit de corps’ or a simple word like ‘buddy’.115 This idea of camaraderie manifested itself even into Adolf Hitler’s


115 Ibid.
ideology when he used what he experienced in World War I, the *Trenchgemeinshaft*, and tried to recreate that unity within Germany itself, a *Volksgemeinshaft*. Camaraderie and nationalism appeared to demonstrate similar ideas.

It was true that the surrounding comrades influenced a soldier’s capacity to fight. C. E. Montague supported this during his days in battle in World War I:

> Our total host might be two millions strong, or ten millions, but whatever its size a man’s world was his section—at most, his platoon; all that mattered to him was the one little boatload of castaways with whom he was marooned on a desert island making shift to keep off the weather and any sudden attack of wild beasts.\(^\text{116}\)

According to this veteran, it seemed that camaraderie, or unit cohesion, received the attention of soldiers.

Going back to the American veterans of World War II study, the investigation suggested that combat men admitted to experiencing fear, apathy about patriotism, and sympathy for the enemy.\(^\text{117}\) The study also found how important cohesion really was: “Loyalty to the group or unit was paramount to high performing units, which were defined as units with low rates of nonbattle casualties.”\(^\text{118}\) Though there is debate about how a unit’s effectiveness in battle can be measured, the idea of camaraderie played a part in the equation.

S. L. A. Marshall also believed in the importance of cohesion. To him, if a soldier knew he was supported, he was less likely to give ground.\(^\text{119}\) And as aforementioned, the support


\(^{117}\) Stewart, 145-6.

\(^{118}\) Ibid. Again, this problem involves non-battle casualties as an indicator of high performing units. Though other indicators, such as killing efficiency or mission efficiency, might be harder to quantify, the non-battle casualty indicator can not be considered completely reliable.

provided by the non-firing soldiers allowed firing soldiers to thrive, as Marshall further noted:
“The moral feeling of physical support in battle derives from the presence of another soldier rather than from the knowledge that he is taking appropriate action.”\textsuperscript{120} Cohesion allowed for the “aggressive will”, where a soldier possessed “friendship, loyalty to responsibility, and knowledge that he is a repository of the faith and confidence of others.”\textsuperscript{121} It allowed for the \textit{esprit de corps}. Only through group unity could this develop, as Charles Young noted: “\textit{Esprit de corps} exists in an organization where the successes or reverses, the joys or sorrows, the reputation or disgrace of one, be it the rawest recruit of the body, are felt by all the others as pertaining to the uniform and honor of the corps.”\textsuperscript{122}

So how did fighting units achieve cohesion? One way was through human interaction. “Speech galvanized the desire to work together.”\textsuperscript{123} This allowed for individual soldiers to know that they were not alone during this trying time. “On the field of fire it is the touch of human nature which gives men courage and enables them to make proper use of their weapons.”\textsuperscript{124} Cohesion, through interaction, arguably enabled non-firing soldiers to actually fire. The British Infantry Training Manual of 1914 reiterated this point. “[When the charge is sounded] the call will be taken up by all buglers, and all neighbouring units will join in the charge as quickly as possible. During the delivery of the assault the men will cheer, bugles be sounded and pipe

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 65.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 157-61.

\textsuperscript{122} Young, 86.

\textsuperscript{123} Marshall, \textit{Men Against Fire}, 138.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid., 41.
\end{flushright}
S. L. A. Marshall summed up how important interaction was to the effectiveness of the soldier: “I hold it to be one of the simplest truths of war that the thing which enables an infantry soldier to keep going with his weapons is the near presence or the presumed presence of a comrade.” For these military scientists, it was interaction that gave the soldiers the will to fight. This interaction was paramount for achieving camaraderie, thus putting the fight into the fighting unit.

For other military scientists and theorists, items such as training, leadership, and competition led to camaraderie. As military psychologists Joseph Peterson and Quentin J. David noted, “…while nations can command men and arms and can purchase munition plants, the most important factor in a successful army-spirit and discipline-can not be handed to an army like some concrete thing, but must be developed through efficient and long training.” Training was the answer, according to military writers, such as Joseph Peterson and Quentin J. David. When training, the individual soldier surrendered his individuality in order to promote the welfare of the fighting unit. This idea correlated with an argument posed by military historian John Keegan; he suggested that the individuality of soldiers declined in sixteenth and seventeenth century warfare. The timing of this decline paralleled the increase in training soldiers for war during this time. Peterson and David furthered their hypothesis, arguing good leadership influenced the idea of fighting as a group. They suggested that a good commander

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125 Holmes, “Battle…,” 201.


128 See Keegan, *History of Warfare*. 

“studies individual differences and know[s] how to stimulate each one to get the best that is in him.”129 After leadership, another item came to play as well, and that item was competition. “There can be little doubt that the spur of competition is necessary to secure the greatest individual and group efficiency.”130 Competition involved not only individuals but teams as well. Team-play allowed for closer ties and it led, “to a fine spirit of friendliness among the men, to cementing together the bonds of good fellowship, and in the army to fighting spirit popularly known as esprit de corps.131 Thus, according to Peterson and David, these three things, training, leadership, and friendly competition, allowed for cohesion to develop. These pieces to the puzzle brought about group cohesion, of which loyalty to the group was a result. “The arousal of loyalty constitutes one of the best means of stimulating an individual to his greatest efforts.”132

For Ardant Du Picq, however, there were several other puzzle pieces. He argued, “the mass always cowers at sight of the phantom, death. Discipline is for the purpose of dominating that horror by a still greater horror, that of punishment or disgrace.”133 But even discipline was not enough because he further suggested that other things were necessary: good arms, national pride, and desire for glory.134 Still, Du Picq conceded that leadership played a major role.135 He

129 Peterson and David, 14.
130 Ibid., 21.
131 Ibid., 53.
132 Ibid., 126.
133 Du Picq, 94.
134 Ibid., 94-5.
135 Ibid.
argued, “The mass needs… leaders who have the firmness and decision of command proceeding from habit and an entire faith in their unquestionable right to command as established by tradition, law and society.” One British officer demonstrated this leadership while retreating from the Germans. He noticed his men grew wearisome from the forced march. “All of them seemed to become suddenly exhausted and unable to keep up, and from now onwards for a couple of days, my life became a burden to me as I was all the time urging, persuading and even kicking men on.” If all of these puzzle pieces developed and fit into place, then the army reached its goal of cohesion, which produced quality soldiers. “Unity alone then produces fighters.”

Yet, the debate continued. Military historians John Keegan and Richard Holmes suggested that in order to obtain good soldiery, a combination of a host of pieces was necessary. For them, the puzzle was complicated. It was vital for the commander to be not only a good leader, but also to get involved in the process.

How does the soldier, beset by the danger of death, fear of wounds and the greatly increased risk of succumbing to disease which membership of an army has entailed for most of military history, sustain his will to combat? Fighting spirit is the mood a commander strives most earnestly to generate and sustain in his army.

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136 Ibid., 95.

137 Major B. T. St. John, 83/17/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 35.

138 Du Picq, 97.

139 Keegan and Holmes, 17.
The best way for a commander to perform this action was to oversee bonds of loyalty and regard between his men that could not break during the course of battle. Thus, group cohesion was also important to Keegan and Holmes. It mattered for both regular and conscript armies.

Regular armies made the platoon or company the unit of both comradeship and firepower. And in the great conscript armies of our century, drafts of reservists have been trained together from the start of their service to foster that comradeship between them they will need to see them through the fires of combat.

The writers endorsed several of the other military writers’ hypotheses, arguing training, comradeship, leadership, and discipline were all vital for cohesion.

The difference with Keegan and Holmes’s theory, however, was that cohesion was not the main piece to the puzzle of good soldiery. As they both noted,

The creation of robust small units, their members linked by enduring bonds of affection, is no guarantee of fighting spirit. Such groups may come to believe that their interests are best served by avoiding rather than seeking combat, and by adopting a ‘live and let live’ policy whenever the enemy will permit it.

Holmes reiterated this idea in another work, writing, “the creation of group spirit is no guarantee of military performance.…” So what did create a soldier who exemplified good soldiery? Keegan Holmes attempted to answer this question, stating numerous pieces were required: esprit de corps, professional standards, soldierly honour, belief in war aims, lure of reward, and

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140 Ibid., 18.
141 Keegan and Holmes, 18.
142 Ibid., 39-52. This argument about the dissipation of patriotism and ideology receives attention later.
143 Ibid., 53.
144 Holmes, Acts of War, 316.
discipline. The problem here was that though these two writers enumerated what they thought were the missing pieces to the soldiery puzzle, they provided no map or key on how to find or create these pieces. They failed to describe how to instill these attributes into the soldier. They suggested which pieces worked, but they neither related where to find those pieces nor how to obtain them.

Thus, the search continued for the building blocks of the effective soldiery. The Stouffer et al group posed another argument: what kept the men fighting was a pretty simple answer. The soldier continued to fight because he desired to “end the task.” Solidarity with the group, in other words cohesion, played a vastly smaller role. Leadership was barely even mentioned among the sampled soldiers, though officers mentioned it much more. If a confusing situation took place, the Stouffer et al group conceded, that “…coercive authority played the key role of prescribing concrete actions to be taken in a situation which might be so confused and uncertain that none of the possible actions seemed desirable.” Still, this leadership possibly stemmed from a strong personality and not necessarily unit officers.

The amazing aspect of all of the arguments posed by the aforementioned writers was the lack of focus on pieces such as build, bravery, age, training, and experience. According to military writer, Charles Young, a good physique was important, but it was meaningless without courage. He added that youth played a role: “Youths from eighteen to twenty-five, as being more agile and teachable, are better adapted to the long and arduous training necessary to make a

145 Keegan and Holmes, 53.
146 Stouffer et al, 108-12.
147 Ibid., 215.
148 Young, 28-9.
good modern soldier in the regular establishment of armies. Training also mattered, especially to historian Douglas Porch, who argued the French soldier’s training was lacking:

Poor training was a major failing of the French Army, both before and during the war. A French conscript spent his first months in basic training, but tended to receive little effective preparation after this…; in 1906, Clemenceau cut the annual training period for reservists from three weeks to two because, he claimed, they were not being trained. Yet, Porch used the fact that training was cut for reservists to demonstrate his point. There was nothing about training being cut for conscripts, so his idea of the French soldier’s poor training only dealt with reservists. As far as experienced veterans versus non-veterans went, there was no difference in casualty rates according to the Stouffer et al study. It found that veteran and non-veteran units had the same casualty rates, arguing there was, “the fact that nonveterans had consistently better attitude scores on willingness for combat and confidence in combat stamina than veterans. On the other had, veterans tended to have better attitude scores on confidence in combat skill than nonveterans.” Porch suggested that seasoned veterans and conscripted masses fought on a level field? This may hold true after repeated exposure to combat, but seemed less likely during the initial exposure. The situation in 1914 involved that initial exposure. The differences in training resulted in divergent experiences for the British, French, and German soldiers. Though nonveterans demonstrated enthusiasm, veterans demonstrated confidence in war. Confidence in war proved more critical for success.

The goal of training, as most military scholars agreed, was to create a soldier that exhibited professionalism. Instilling camaraderie aided this endeavor. Another aspect of

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149 Ibid., 30-1.


151 Stouffer et al, 23.
professionalism involved the interaction with civilians. Carl von Clausewitz alluded to this idea, arguing that through training, soldiers could act professionally. “Real war,” with its imagery of hell and carnage, could be avoided. How soldiers interacted with civilians demonstrated professionalism. Clausewitz would agree.  

To sum up, there was disagreement on the pieces to the soldiery puzzle, and there was disagreement as to whether or not cohesion was indeed “the rub.” Military writers Ardant Du Picq, N. Kinzer Stewart, S.L.A. Marshall, Charles Young, Joseph Peterson, and Quentin J. David all argued that unit cohesion was the key to finishing the puzzle of soldiery. Yet, each had different techniques on how to obtain cohesion. John Keegan, Richard Holmes, and the Stouffer et al group stated that cohesion was not necessarily the biggest piece to the puzzle. For those three, there were several pieces, and little agreement existed on the importance of each one. With regard to war experience and even to a certain degree, training, little emphasis existed in the works of these military writers.

Still, one common theme the writers suggested involved camaraderie. Camaraderie brought ideas of loyalty to the group. Trusting and relying on comrades helped the soldier tolerate the obstacles of war. Camaraderie also sparked acts of courage and heroism, thus demonstrating aspects of professionalism. Group-thought was at work, and it influenced the soldiers of the British, French, and German armies. In essence, the mentality of camaraderie served as a microcosm of the mentality of the nation. Similarities existed. How comrades acted influenced the group. Could this statement not also apply to the nation?

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The Influence of Culture

Historians and scientists debated on war equipment and training. With regard to 1914, the German advantage in fire and numbers proved crucial in the initial phase of war, but those assets did not bring victory. They did, however, influence the experience of the soldiers. Those soldiers were the ones who helped decide the issue. Overcoming all of the physiological obstacles and fighting through the hardships of war required training. A combination of pieces went into training. Military scholarship disagreed on which pieces deserved the most attention, but the common theme of camaraderie presented itself. Camaraderie demonstrated traits similar to nationalism.

Could the final piece to the soldiery puzzle involve nationalism? As John Keegan, Richard Holmes, and other writers suggested, culture influenced warfare.153 The culture, either influence by environment or by a combination of other institutions, in fact affected the thought processes and mores of the fighting soldier as well as the state involved in the war. Culture influenced ideology. Keegan and Holmes both proposed that belief in war aims was a fundamental piece to soldiery.154 Culture influenced the belief in war aims? Keegan and Holmes, however, contradicted themselves in their writings, arguing that patriotism and ideology quickly dissipated as war went on.155 Military scientist, Elmar Dinter, also dismissed ideology

153 See Keegan, History of Warfare; Hanson, Carnage and Culture: Landmark Battles in the Rise of Western Power; Fritz, Frontsoldaten; and Friday, Samurai, Warfare and the State in Early Medieval Japan as well as Chapter 1.

154 Keegan and Holmes, 53.

155 Keegan and Holmes, 39-52.
and culture, writing, “Soldiers of different nationalities react almost always in a similar manner.”

Dismissing ideology, and therefore culture, was a mistake. Culture, and the ideology of that culture, influenced warfare. Aztec wars in the 15th century occurred to capture soldiers for sacrifice because the Aztecs thought the gods required nourishment. The Iberian conflicts in the fifteenth century involved Catholics kicking the non-Catholics out of the peninsula because the non-Catholics possessed a different ideology in terms of faith. Culture proved influential in warfare. In World War II, Japanese soldiers committed wide-spread atrocities against China and Korea but American soldiers did not commit wide-spread atrocities against Italians? Japan and the U.S.A., like the Aztecs and Spanish, were two different cultures, and since ideology, i.e. culture, influenced warfare, different cultures experienced war differently.

Europe, in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, was a culture of nationalism. Whether it was as extreme as fascism or as moderate as French liberalism in 1848, nationalism became an intrinsic piece to European culture. These were not just three states going to war in 1914. The British, French, and German armies were three nations. Not only did differences in training and equipment cause divergent experiences for the British, French, and German soldiers, but nationalism, in its various forms, also resulted in dissimilar ordeals.

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CHAPTER TWO
NATIONALISM: TO BE OR NOT TO BE

That was the eponymous character’s question in William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, but is that the only part of the question. “To be or not to be” simply began the debate; “who will I be” ended it. It was here where the idea of nationalism entered stage left (or right, depending on the type of nationalism, which will be discussed in this chapter). In 1914, a strong current of nationalism existed in Europe. This movement influenced Europe and its soldiers, but what was nationalism, exactly? Was it something real or rather imagined? Was the movement a phenomenon of modernity, or does the idea of nationalism trace itself further back into history? Finally, were all nationalist movements created equally? Understanding the characteristics of nationalism allowed a better understanding of the soldiers who fought for its cause. Not only did nationalism exist in Great Britain, France, and Germany by 1914, dissimilar ideas about the nation influenced the three nations, and their soldiers, differently. Nationalism, a real movement, was a product of modernity, thus placing more emphasis on 1914. It was that year when nationalism first appeared in major battle.

**Definitions, Perceptions, and Modernity**

What was nationalism? According to nationalism theorist, Ernest Gellner, nationalism was “primarily a political principle, which holds that the political and the national unit should be

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congruent.”

Hans Kohn, another theorist on nationalism, argued, “Nationalism is first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness….”

Nationalism relied on “group-consciousness.” Kohn continued, arguing that, “The growth of nationalism is the process of integration of the masses of the people into a common political form.”

Though a self-evident statement, Kohn stressed the idea that, “Nationality is formed by the decision to form a nationality.” Again, “to be or not to be” was only part of the question. The key point involved the masses having an interest in being a nation.

For nationalism represents “vested interests,” not only political and economic but also intellectual and emotional, of an intensity and extent shown by no previous idea. In the face of the omnipotence of nationality, humanity seems a distant idea, a pale theory or a poetic dream, through which the red blood of life does not pulsate.

The obvious follow-up question involved what was a nation? The plot thickened here.

According to author, Anthony P. Smith, nations were historical processes that possessed


4 Ibid., 11.

5 Ibid., 4.

6 Ibid., 15.

7 Ibid., 21-2.
continuity and required a serviceable past. The author continued this discussion in his work dealing with the theories of nationalism. He argued,

the individual has no meaning apart from the community of birth. Individuality is predicated of the group. The individual can realize himself through it alone. It has a life history, it is self-generating and self-sufficient, a seamless, mythic entity, ascertainable through objective characteristics—of history, religion, language and customs. Nations are “natural” wholes, they constitute the sole historical realities. Therefore the individual is primarily distinguishable in terms of his nationality, and only secondarily by social and personal traits. To opt out of the community is to risk the loss of a man’s individuality.

Ernest Renan, a French thinker in the late 19th century, presented a lecture at the Sorbonne in 1882 where he attempted to explain the concept of a nation.

A nation is a soul, a spiritual principle. Two things, which in truth are but one, constitute this soul or spiritual principle. One lies in the past, one in the present. One is the possession in common of a rich legacy of memories; the other is present-day consent, the desire to live together, the will to perpetuate the value of the heritage that one has received in an undivided form.

Renan continued, suggesting, “A nation’s existence is, if you will pardon the metaphor, a daily plebiscite, just as an individual’s existence is a perpetual affirmation of life.” For the French thinker, a nation’s existence was “the guarantee of liberty….”

To become a nation, several criteria were necessary. According to nationalist author, Miroslav Hrock,

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11 Ibid., 53.

12 Ibid.
…three stand out as irreplaceable: (i) a “memory” of some common past, treated as a “destiny” of the group—or at least of its core constituents; (ii) a density of linguistic or cultural ties enabling a higher degree of social communication within the group than beyond it; (iii) a conception of the equality of all members of the group organized as a civil society.13

Simply put, nationalism involved choice. It concerned the collective determining to be a nation. However, could all nations become an actual Nation? According to author, E. J. Hobsbawm, the answer was not so simple.14 There were criteria a nation needed to meet in order to “pass the threshold,” or enable itself to create a Nation. A historic association with a current state, i.e. Britain and France, was necessary. There needed to be a well-established, cultural elite, i.e. Germany (and Italy). Finally, a capacity for conquest was also required.15

A Product of Imagination?

But, was the nation real or imagined? For Gellner, nationalism was not some timeless force but rather was a man-made creation that arose from modernity, or the industrial revolution.16 The author wrote further, suggesting that there was even deception involving nationalism. In his interesting “megalomania versus ruritania” argument, he postulated that the high culture of “megalomania” eventually imposed itself and overtook the low culture of “ruritania.”17 For example, the inhabitants of France eventually spoke the French language


15 Ibid.

16 See Gellner.

17 Ibid.
despite the fact that only fifty percent of France spoke French in 1789, and only twelve-thirteen percent of France spoke it correctly, according to E. J. Hobsbawm. Nationalist writer, Liah Greenfield, expanded this idea even further, stating that five language groups existed within France during the middle ages with the actual French language existing only around Paris before 1789. The idea of language as being important in establishing a nation received further discrediting by Benedict Anderson. Until the late 18th century, language was not even associated with a territory or people. For example, Dutch burghers spoke French while Germans spoke Czech in Bohemia. This was an example of a high culture, i.e. "megalomania," imposing its culture over the low culture, i.e. "ruritania."

Other writers on the subject concurred with the idea that nationalism was merely a creation. For Benedict Anderson, nationalism was an imagined political community. By imagined, he argued it was imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign. It was imagined because most members would never know fellow members, limited because of the limited boundaries being imagined, and sovereign because the concept was born in age of Enlightenment and Revolution. Nineteenth century nationalist writer, Ernest Renan, also supported the idea that a need for imagination was necessary for nationalism to work.

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21 Ibid., 6.

22 Ibid., 6-7.
Yet the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things. No French citizen knows whether he is a Burgundian, an Alan, a Taifale, or a Visigoth, yet every French citizen has to have forgotten the massacre of Saint Bartholomew, or the massacres that took place in the Midi in the thirteenth century. There are not ten families in France that can supply proof of their Frankish origin, and any such proof would anyway be essentially flawed, as a consequence of countless unknown alliances which are liable to disrupt any genealogical system.23

What was even more interesting was the idea that nationalism was not only imagined, but the masses also needed to demonstrate a bit of amnesia. For example, William the Conqueror, also known as “the founder of England,” spoke no English; in fact, he was a foreigner who actually conquered the English.24 Therefore, common language (or common ethnicity) was not necessarily a prerequisite to a common nation. T. de Mauro emphasized this point when discussing the fact that only two and one-half percent of the population of the Italian peninsula could speak Italian in the years leading up to Italian unification.25

Thus, nationalism was not an absolute result of a society or culture. Yet, a culture could imagine a community, as Hans Kohn argues.

Nationality has been raised to an absolute by two fictitious concepts which have been accepted as having real substance. One holds that blood or race is the basis of nationality, and that it exists eternally and carries with it an unchangeable inheritance; the other sees the Volksgeist as an ever-welling source of nationality and all its manifestations.… [T]hey refer us to mythical prehistorical pseudo-realities.26

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23 Renan, 45.

24 Anderson, 195.


26 Kohn, The Idea of Nationalism, 13. The term Volksgeist can translate to the national mind or spirit of the people.
So, was nationalism indeed imagined? Even if nationalism was imagined, that did mean it was not real. Was the notion of a supreme being imagined? Regardless of the answer, the idea of a supreme being was no less real to millions of people. Even if a nation seemed imagined, if it was perceived to exist by the collective, then it existed to the collective. Thus, it was real. It dealt with choice, the choice of the collective. Though half of France did not speak French in 1789, by 1914, French was the language of France.\textsuperscript{27} The Scots accepted a partnership with the English after the Act of Union in 1707; the idea of “Britishness” evolved from there.\textsuperscript{28}

Thus, nationalism was about perception. If an individual perceived himself to be a member of a specific collective, then that collective was real to the individual. If enough individuals followed the same path, then a nation was born. Nationalism existed, regardless of being imagined or real. The next question involved why nationalism only received attention within the last two centuries. Was nationalism a modern phenomenon, or did its roots trace back long before modernity? Nationalist theorists debated these questions.

\textit{Connection with Modernity}

For Ernest Gellner, there was no debate: nationalism was a modern phenomenon.\textsuperscript{29} He contended, for nationalism to work, the high culture had to take over (“megalomania.”) In addition, educational systems needed to flourish (to keep the literate culture going), populations needed to be anonymous (i.e. unrigid, fluid, mobile), and the individual had to feel that he belonged directly to the nation. In order to meet these criteria, communication, the Industrial

\textsuperscript{27} See Weber, \textit{Peasants into Frenchmen}.

\textsuperscript{28} See Colley, \textit{Britons: Forging a Nation (1707-1837)}.

\textsuperscript{29} See Gellner, \textit{Nations and Nationalism}. 
Revolution, and Protestantism were all necessary. With regard to communication, the literacy rate needed to be relatively high. This was only a recent phenomenon in the history of Europe. Gellner argued that it was the Industrial Revolution that allowed for social mobility. Non-industrialized societies, or agrarian systems, possessed rigid divisions; therefore, social mobility was not present. Gellner also argued that only with Protestantism did societies see a rise in both the vernacular and individualism. Man was now his own priest. Thus, man had equal access to God, which corresponded to equal access to the high culture.30

The year 1884 was actually the first time academics even dealt with nationalism in a modern sense, according to E. J. Hobsbawm.31 He agreed with Gellner in the idea that nationalism was a modern phenomenon. For Liah Greenfield, nationalism was not only a modern event, but it was actually the basis of the modern world and modernity.32 She continued, arguing that nationalism replaced the Ancien Regime, and its society based on orders, with a society based on the nation.33

Another facet of nationalism involved the rise of the state. For writer Paul Gilbert, the rise of the modern state brought with it an attempt to justify itself to the people; it did this by offering the people the notion of membership to the state, i.e. nation.34 Can one not find this concept in John Locke’s Two Treatises on Government (1690)?

30 Ibid.
31 See Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780.
33 Ibid., 485-92.
Benedict Anderson concurred with this idea of nationalism being a modern event, arguing that the late 18th century was the dawn of nationalism and dusk of the religious mode of thought. Still, the dawning of nationalism needed the stars to set. The rise of vernacular was a necessity. By year 1501, Anderson noted that books printed in Latin dropped from seventy-seven percent (estimate) to nine percent in Paris—the rest were printed in French. In his mind, nationalism arose when script (a language offering access to truth) arose, societies organized themselves around high centers (monarchs), and a conception of temporality (origins of world and man identical) appeared. He also suggested that the dusk of the religious mode of thought also contributed to the dawning of nationalism. Only then did people begin to look at fatality and mortality in terms of the secular. The idea of a soul or spirit left the church and reappeared in the idea of a nation.

Nationalist writer Hans Kohn furthered the relationship with modernity and nationalism. Though he conceded that the roots of nationalism existed in ancient times, it made its full appearance only in the culture of modernity.

Only in the eighteenth century, through the simultaneous emergence of nationalism, democracy, and industrialism, all three closely linked in origin and continuous interaction, an ever-quickening and ever-widening process of acculturation, economic

35 Anderson, 11.
37 Anderson, 37-46.
38 Ibid., 11.
exchange, and intensification of communication started, so that in the nineteenth and
twentieth centuries every important movement gained world-wide character.40

Kohn further argued this point. “Nationalism is inconceivable without the ideas of popular
sovereignty preceding—without a complete revision of the position of ruler and ruled, of classes
and castes.”41

Writer Anthony P. Smith partially agreed with Kohn when he suggested that the roots of
nationalism existed before modernity. He argued that nations were not modern in that they did
not simply just appear.42 They were a process, i.e. a presumption of a “national past.” They
required either ethnic cores or inventing ethnic cores. Nations also needed inspiration by a
demotic culture, a homeland, heroes, and golden ages. Although Smith conceded that nations
became possible because of a decline in religion and an increase in the printed word, the ethnic
processes were still important. It would be here where the modern nations’ roots, such as myths,
memories, values, and symbols all existed. Smith elaborated when discussing these pre-modern
ethnic communities. He stressed the ethnic component, where there needed to be a named
human population, a shared ancestral culture and history, an association with a specific territory,
and a sense of solidarity. He believed that religion aided in the preservation of an ethnic culture,
such as the Venerable Bede’s contribution to England. Conflict also rallied groups. The ancient
Greeks demonstrated this idea to a degree when the Persian threat loomed. The more a nation
felt threatened, the more vital it viewed its own culture. It was its raison d’être, or reason to

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid., 3.

Ethnicism was collective, and there was a resistance to both external and internal threats. Despite his emphasis on ethnicity, Smith argued that ethnicity was not necessarily static. It had the potential to evolve, but to a point. For Smith, ethnicity was not completely malleable or fluid, either. One interesting point Smith brought to light was his suggestion that mass armies tended to solidify ethnicity or nationalism. To sum up Smith’s argument, nations did not grow out of a vacuum. They were processes rooted in the past. That being stated, even Smith conceded that nations were achieved, above all, by mobilization through modes of communication by binding the elites to the masses. This suggested a high level of communication was necessary, which suggested this could only occur in the modern world. As nationalism writer Paul Gilbert noted, “Nationalism is a doctrine that implies particular political goals which themselves presuppose the development of the modern state.”

Though there was disagreement about the origins of nationalism amongst the writers of this topic, the idea of a fluid population, a centralized state, a vernacular language (which required print to give it fixity), a decline in religion, and the role of the Industrial Revolution all helped suggest its connection with modernity. The Enlightenment and French Revolution further cultivated nationalism. In a time when the only known idea of a state, the dynastic realm, was in decline, the state required a new way to legitimize itself. The “long nineteenth century” (1789-

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43 This is an important element in the romantic nationalism of Germany, as will be discussed later in this chapter.


45 Ibid.

46 Gilbert, 11.

47 Anderson, 18.
1914) saw areas attempting to do just that.\textsuperscript{48} Thus, 1914 became significant because it saw the culmination of modernity. This was the time where adolescent to adult nations met.

\textbf{Not all Nations are Created Equally}

Yet, were all nations created equal? Nationalist writer, Liah Greenfield, thought not. She stressed a connection, a connection between nationalism and democracy.

The location of sovereignty within the people and the recognition of the fundamental equality among its various strata, which constitute the essence of the modern national idea, are at the same time the basic tenets of democracy. Democracy was born with the sense of nationality. The two are inherently linked, and neither can be fully understood apart from this connection. Nationalism was the form in which democracy appeared in the world, contained in the idea of the nation as a butterfly in a cocoon. Originally, nationalism developed as democracy; where the conditions of such original development persisted, the identity between the two was maintained. But as nationalism spread in different conditions and the emphasis in the idea of the nation moved from the sovereign character to the uniqueness of the people, the original equivalence between it and democratic principles was lost. One implication of this, which should be emphasized, is that democracy may not be exportable.\textsuperscript{49}

Thus, nationalism did not develop the same way in different areas. Its evolution in varying ways suggested how it matured. Two types of nationalism evolved: individualistic-libertarian and collectivistic-authoritarian.\textsuperscript{50} For Greenfield, collective ideologies were inherently authoritarian, as she elaborated,

nationalism…may be either “civic,” that is, identical with citizenship, or “ethnic.” In the former case, nationality is at least in principle open and voluntaristic; it can and sometimes must be acquired. In the latter, it is believed to be inherent—one can neither acquire it if one does not have it, nor change it if one does; it has nothing to do with individual will, but constituted a genetic characteristic. Individualist nationalism cannot

\textsuperscript{48} The idea of 1789-1914 being the “long nineteenth century” stems from the David Blackbourn in \textit{The Long Nineteenth Century}. The year 1914 is a more fitting year for the purposes of this work.

\textsuperscript{49} Greenfield, 10.

\textsuperscript{50} Ibid., 11.
be but civic, but civic nationalism can also be collectivistic. More often, though, collectivistic nationalism takes on the form of ethnic particularism, while ethnic nationalism is necessarily collectivistic.”

Though she placed a disclaimer that these were only models to be approximated, Greenfield provided a blue-print, as illustrated below.

**Figure 1.** Greenfield Model of Nationalism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Civic</th>
<th>Ethnic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Individualistic-libertarian</strong></td>
<td>Type I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Collectivistic-authoritarian</strong></td>
<td>Type II</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus, the institutions present in cultures molded nationalism into different versions, and those divergent models of nationalism molded societies into different types of states. Greenfield argued that the individualist/civic type of nationalism led to democratic, liberal societies while the collectivistic/ethnic nationalism led to autocratic states. For Greenfield, the differences in types of nationalism did not develop in a vacuum. She explained the causal seeds of variation, specifically concerning England, France, and Germany; and she suggested these seeds already received cultivation by the time of modernity.

Hans Kohn agreed with Greenfield as far as differences existing between nationalistic movements. He argued that nationalism stemmed from two places: the “3rd Estate” and the *Volksgeist*. Examples of the “3rd Estate” type included France and Great Britain while an

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51 Ibid., 11.

example of the latter included Germany, where the idea of a nation existed in literature, folklore, language, and history.

**Importance of Culture**

Leah Greenfield argued that specific historical experiences can shape nations differently. Anthony P. Smith seconded that statement. For Smith, cultural attributes of memory, value, myth, symbolism (that are all often recorded in arts, language, science, and law) helped predict what type of nation will grow. Variations of nationalism occurred because there were variations of historical experiences. He emphasized that ethnicity and its roots determined the nature and limits of modern nations and nationalism. Still, despite the numerous historical variations and limitations, Smith contended, as opposed to Greenfield, that only two routes to national status occurred: civic-territorial and ethnic-geneological.

The civic-territorial type of nationalism involved bureaucratic states in territorial units of law molding a nation, i.e. Great Britain and France; the ethnic-geneological type reacted against bureaucratic states and formed a state based on the demotic and vernacular. For the territorial (Britain and France), there was a sense of boundary, a common (enough) culture that was able to unite different ethnic groups over time, a sense of legalism that equated to citizenship, and a type of civil religion that created a cultural homogeneity. Within this framework, there were ethnic minorities who “accepted” the dominant culture. Examples of this included the Scots in Britain

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54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.
and the Bretons of France. To be successful, inclusion (citizenship) was necessary in order to break ethnic barriers.56

The ethnic style of nationalism based itself on pre-existing ethnicity and ethnic ties. It was "folkish." It relied, in the German case, on the Volk. The ethnic style emphasized customs and cultural institutions over legality. There was no state for the group of people; therefore, the folk instigated it. This state based itself on the customs of the folk, and these customs conflicted with inclusion of all people living in the newly created state. These variants caused the discordant styles to develop differently, according to Smith.57

Benedict Anderson also noted the dissimilarity. There was a fundamental distinction between the divergent generations of nationalism. The first generation (pre-1815) demonstrated the political state creating the nation. Ideas of liberalism and inclusion into society were necessary for the nation-polity to work. The state becoming the state-nation did not happen overnight, but if seeds were planted successfully, the nation developed. Great Britain and France served as examples of this generation. According to Benedict Anderson, the second generation of nationalism (1815-50) looked more toward national (ethnic) genealogy, or memory, to help identify itself as opposed to the first generation, which focused on political boundaries and institutions for identification.58 There was debate, however, with this idea involving the second generation. E. J. Hobsbawm argued that even during the period 1830-1870, the state made the nation, not vice-versa.59 Was this accurate? Who was correct? Hobsbawm argued that during

56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Anderson, 194-5.
59 See E. J. Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780.
this period, the state eventually succeeded in creating a nation. Great Britain, as historian Linda Colley argued, succeeded in creating an island of “Britons.”60 France succeeded in morphing a former kingdom into a nation of Frenchmen. Benedict Anderson suggested that the seeds of nationalism began to shift from 1815 to 1850, where ethnicity and culture played a more important role. His logic deserved attention, especially after examining the creation of Belgium and Greece during this period as well as the attempted creation of some type of German state. For Hobsbawm, it was in the third generation where a shift really developed. From 1870 to 1918, a major change occurred where an abandonment of the criteria for nationalism, or Hobsbawm’s “threshold principle,” ensued.61 This phase saw language and ethnicity becoming more important to the nationalism process because of the multiplication of potential “unhistoric” nations.62 The influence of the Romantic Movement showed itself. Though nationalism consistently fell under the umbrella of liberalism before, this was not the case by the third generation. What was worthy to note involved the dramatic difference between the first generation and the third generation. The first generation, defining itself in terms of political boundaries and institutions, offered political rights to its inhabitants. A sense of liberalism (and perhaps socialism) existed, where the rights and liberties of the individual (and the collective consisting of the individuals) received endorsement. Nationalism by the third generation (1850/1870-1918/45) saw ethnicity determining the nation. Ideas of individualism fell by the wayside, replaced by the ideas of the collective nation. With a lack of political rights, the shift of

60 See Colley, Britons: Forging a Nation (1707-1837).

61 See Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780.

62 See Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780.
nationalism to the far right on the political spectrum was not shocking. And, it was within this context and time frame that Germany first appeared on the map.

Author Miroslav Hroch also suggested two paths, and in turn two types, of nationalism. For Hroch, the first type involved a transition to a capitalist economy and civil society.\(^{63}\) England and France served as examples. The second type involved an “‘exogenous’ ruling class [that] dominated ethnic groups which occupied a compact territory but lacked ‘their own’ nobility, political unit or continuous literary tradition.”\(^{64}\) The question arose: did Germany fall into this category? German probably did not. Hroch concerned himself more with eastern Europe, so he would suggest that Germany fell in line more with the first type. Political theorist Paul Gilbert also suggested two types of nationalism: nonsocietal and societal.\(^{65}\) Nonsocietal nationalism involved nations that were aggregates of individuals; the aggregates looked for things that distinguished themselves from others. In the societal type, individuals searched for features that they shared with others, thus binding themselves to a group. Gilbert’s two groups paralleled the notion of the ethnic nationalism and the civic nationalism.

Geoff Eley and Ronald Grigor Suny also noted differences in types of nationalism when they examined the works of Hans Kohn: “the history of nationalism represented a progressive degeneration from rationality into a kind of madness.…”\(^{66}\) Eley and Suny continued, suggesting

\(^{63}\) Hroch, 60.

\(^{64}\) Ibid.

\(^{65}\) Gilbert, 23-4.

that Hans Kohn distinguished between two types of nationalisms. There was the political or “voluntarist” conception of nationality where a nation was one of freely associating individuals.\textsuperscript{67} Then, there was the irrational or organic type, which denied contractual basis and insisted on the inherited, historical character of national identity.\textsuperscript{68} For Kohn, this second type originated with Herder and the German romantics, and it also reacted against the French Revolution, where notions of citizenship and popular sovereignty resided.\textsuperscript{69}

To summarize, many scholars argued that there were differences in the development of a nation. Why were differences present? They existed because of the culture in which those seeds of nationalism grew. The cultures of Britain, France, and Germany were all different, and the nationalist movements that stemmed from these cultures demonstrated those variations.

\textit{Britain: Civil Engineering a Nation}

For England, Greenfield saw a link between Parliament and the nation.\textsuperscript{70} There was a rise in mobility during the Tudor era where nobility became more dependent on merit than before. “It is at this juncture, I believe, that nationality was born…” according to Greenfield.\textsuperscript{71} She suggested that nationalism, in fact, flourished from the seeds of this mobility along with the English bible in 1538, the rise of Protestantism, and the language of the Elizabethan writers.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{67} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid., 4.

\textsuperscript{70} Greenfield, 27-88.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 27-88.
The English were not some homogenous group of people. As writer Daniel Defoe noted, in “The True-Born English Man,” the English were a multi-ethnic race consisting of Brits, Celts, Saxons, Danes, Romans, and French.73 But, according to historian Linda Colley, “Englishness” was just the beginning. For Colley, the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars created not just a sense of “Englishness,” but rather a sense of “Britishness.”74 The continual conflict with France created a mass allegiance toward the idea. Sir David Wilkie’s Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo helped demonstrate this point, as seen below.

Figure 2.75 Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo

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73 See Colley, Britons: Forging a Nation (1707-1837).

74 Ibid.

This image depicted a mixture of classes, genders, and ethnicities all in celebration upon hearing the news of Great Britain’s (not England’s) victory at the Battle of Waterloo. Sir David Wilkie, who was commissioned as Principal Painter to the Crown by Queen Victoria in 1837, demonstrated this development of a sense of “Britishness.” As Colley noted,

The date, the artist tells us, is Thursday, 22 June 1815, and the first official confirmation has just been released of the British Allied Victory at Waterloo. The scene is a long-since demolished street in Chelsea called Jew’s Row, lined with old, low-storeyed [sic] taverns, cheap lodging houses, pawn-brokers and rag shops, but close, nonetheless to Chelsea Hospital, a home for invalid and retired soldiers since the late seventeenth century. And it is a miscellaneous crowd of soldiers, veterans, womenfolk and shabbily dressed workers that is shown reacting to the news. A Scottish Highlander plunges into a celebratory tune on the bagpipes, and women are being drawn into a dance. A sergeant tosses his baby into the air, the child fizzing with excitement at the colour and the noise. His companion pauses in arranging her hair, her arms raised motionless above her head as she listens pensively to the account of the battle. Just as entranced is an elderly oyster-seller who has stopped in the very act of slitting open an oyster and is grinning toothlessly as her imagination catches fire. Girls wave handkerchiefs, men strain out of windows to catch the news. Everywhere, there is music, laughter, abundant beer, good-humoured flirtation, intense interest and something far more significant.

Colley continued, explaining the significance.

Explicit in this strictly imaginary scene is the existence of a mass British patriotism transcending the boundaries of class, ethnicity, occupation, sex and age. But the key to the painting which Wilkie published at the time shows that he wanted to convey something more than this. Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo is, in fact, one man’s very perceptive interpretation of both the variety and the roots of Britishness. The horseman shown bringing the news of the victory is from a Welsh regiment; the soldiers gathering around him include Scotsmen, Englishmen, an Irishman and even a black military bandsman. The Chelsea pensioner reading aloud from

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76 Ibid.


78 Colley, 364-5. Colley relies heavily on Miles and Brown, Sir David Wilkie of Scotland, for this section. Also notice the setting of the painting: Jew’s Row. The inclusion of minorities is another theme of British nationalism. Not all nationalist movements follow this pattern, as later discussed in Chapter Three.
the closely printed pages of the *Gazette* is a veteran of the battle for Quebec in 1759. And hanging above the row of taverns are inn signs bearing witness to yet more battles, yet more wars. There is ‘The Duke of York’, in memory of Britain’s war with Revolutionary France. There is ‘The Snow Shoes’, a relic from the War of American Independence. And there is even a sign commemorating the Marquess of Granby, hero of the Battle of Culloden in 1746 and the Seven Years War. More than anything else, Wilkie seems to be suggesting, it is the experience of recurrent wars that has brought these diverse peoples together. Conflict with a dangerous and hostile Other has glossed over internal divisions and fostered union of a kind, making it possible for him, a Scot, to paint a London scene in celebration of a victory won by an Anglo-Irishman, Arthur Wellesley, Duke of Wellington. War, this picture contends and proclaims, has been the making of Great Britain.79

For the Scotsman Sir David Wilkie, what helped define “Britishness” was conflict with the “Other,” but other factors, as Colley argued, contributed as well, including religion and both commercial and imperial hegemony. The war rallied the inhabitants of the island together. The influence of Protestantism helped strengthen that bond, with notions of “a city on hill” dancing in Britons’ heads. Finally, the commercial and imperial hegemony solidified the idea of “Britishness.”80 The question then followed whether or not this was a movement by the middle class. As historian Norman Gash suggests, the British aristocracy and gentry retained some of their traditional political power by being flexible and making concessions.81

Scotland’s role in this fusion of peoples into a nation provided great insight. Historian Tom Nairn illustrated this point, arguing that Scotland had all the components for its own nationalism.82 Scotland had a dynamic middle class, an *intelligentsia*, its own folklore, a

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81 See Gash, *Aristocracy and People: Britain 1815-65*.

different Reformation than England, and was not a “geschichtloses Volk” (history-less people). With all of those attributes, why did Scotland not follow its own path to nationalism? The Edinburgh Review in 1755 provided insight to the answer.

“The memory of our ancient state is not so much obliterated, but that, by comparing the past with the present, we may clearly see the superior advantages we now enjoy, and readily discern from what source they flow…. The communication of trade has awakened industry; the equal administration of laws produced good manners…and a disposition to every species of improvement in the minds of a people naturally active and intelligent. If countries have their ages with respect to improvement, North Britain may be considered as in a state of early youth, guided and supported by the more mature strength of her kindred country…. What the Revolution had begun, the Union rendered more complete.”

It was the economic advantages that lured Scotland into the fold. Scotland, herself, threw off the vestiges of the Ancien Regime and went through religious reform, but the Union and the advantages of it neutralized any nationalist movement.” As a general rule, people who were content with the status quo tended to be conservative. These people did not really feel the need to change much of anything. A nineteenth century Scottish lord echoed this idea, as Tom Nairn noted:

“We had wonderfully few proper Jacobins,” he comments wryly upon the Scottish élite’s whole sale slide into reaction, “but if Scotch Jacobinism did not exist, Scotch Toryism did, and with a vengeance. This party engrossed almost the whole wealth, and rank, and public office, of the country, and at least three-fourths of the population.”

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83 Ibid., 88.


85 Nairn, 91.

The Scottish bourgeoisie felt content.\textsuperscript{87} If one appeared happy with a partnership, why change? If one felt included in a union, why seek independence? Scotland did indeed have a voice in the affairs of the government; it participated heavily in the civil society that Britain created. In fact, Scotland was overly represented in both the British government and the British Empire.\textsuperscript{88} A case in point would be William Gladstone, regarded as one of the greatest Prime Ministers of Britain. He served with distinction in the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century. And yes, he was of Scottish descent.

Did the Irish have a sense of “Britishness?” Though that question seemed blasphemous to certain people, there was evidence to suggest the answer was in fact “yes.” In writer Elizabeth Bowen’s play, \textit{The Last September} (1929), set three years after the Easter Rising of 1916, the character of Sir Richard Naylor demonstrated this point.\textsuperscript{89} Sir Naylor struggled with the conflict of being a member of the Irish nation, whether he liked it or not, and his allegiance to Britain, which he voluntarily pledged. Though the Irish question came forward with the Easter Rebellion in 1916, evidence of allegiance to the idea of Britishness appeared in 1914. For example, the Irish Catholics pledged to abandon their conflict with the Ulster Protestants in order to guard the coasts, side-by-side with the Ulster Protestants.\textsuperscript{90}

\textsuperscript{87} Nairn, 100.

\textsuperscript{88} See Colley, \textit{Britons: Forging a Nation} (1707-1837).


A rational nationalism, featuring elements of liberty, individuality, tolerance, and inclusion, developed in the nationalist movement in Britain. This concept of “Britishness” received its influence from the Enlightenment and Age of Reason. Those cultural movements instilled these progressive ideas into the British nation.

France: From Divine Right to Frenchmen’s Rights

For France, the seeds of nationalism lied with the monarchy. The allegiance toward the crown, especially during the era of divine right and absolutism, allowed the flourishing of the French nation. Greenfield argued that the aristocratic reaction to absolutism was to look to culture for an identity instead of status due to absolutism’s encroachment on the society of orders. It was, ironically, the aristocracy that enabled nationalism to take place. “The French Revolution—that ‘first great revolution in modern history’—was, therefore, a child of the aristocratic reaction.” Due to the threat of a modern absolute state, the aristocracy attempted to reclaim power, thus spiraling France down the road of revolution. What happened next was the eradication of the monarchy, the source of identity and unifying factor for the people living in the (former) kingdom of France. The idea, or symbol, that replaced the king was simply the idea of a nation. This nation differed from the British because it suggested that the French nation was the super-human collective—the general will of Rousseau manifesting itself. For the French, the dignity of the whole allowed for the dignity of the member. While British nationalism centered on the individual, French nationalism focused on the collective, composed of individuals. For

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92 Ibid., 153.
the French, the liberty of the nation allowed the freedom of the individual. It was about the “greater good.” Eugène Delacroix’s masterpiece illustrated this point, as seen below.

Figure 3.93 Le 28 Juillet, La Liberté conduisant le people aux barricades

The painting, Le 28 Juillet, La Liberté conduisant le people aux barricades, brought out the nature of French nationalism. Though Eugene Delacroix identified himself as an aristocrat, he was moved by the July Revolution of 1830 that replaced the reactionary monarch, Charles X,

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with the citizen king, Louis-Philippe.\textsuperscript{94} He portrayed the masses revolting, following the allegorical female figure representing Liberty. He allegedly wrote to his brother, a retired general, stating, “I have undertaken a modern subject, a barricade…. If I did not fight for our country, at least I will paint for her.”\textsuperscript{95} Delacroix “romanticized” the uprising by suggesting to the viewer that the populace spontaneously took up arms, “united in yearning for liberty.”\textsuperscript{96}

The figures emerge from a haze of smoke—a symbol of France’s political emergence from the shackles of tyranny to enlightened republicanism. Visible in the distance is the Paris skyline with the towers of Notre Dame Cathedral. From here the rebels will fly the tricolor, the red, white, and blue French flag.\textsuperscript{97}

Lady Liberty possessed a Greek profile and bore her breasts, thus referencing statues of antiquity.\textsuperscript{98}

By incorporating antiquity into his figure of Liberty, Delacroix makes a nostalgic “romantic” appeal to Roman republican sentiment. Among Liberty’s followers are representatives of different social classes, who are united by their common cause. In their determined march forward, they trample the corpses beneath them. They are willing to die themselves, secure in the knowledge that others will arise to take their place…. Delacroix integrates color with the painting’s message…. the colors that appear most vividly on the flag itself are repeated with more or less intensity throughout the picture plane…. In echoing the colors of the flag, which is at once a symbol of Liberty and of French republicanism, Delacroix paints a political manifesto.\textsuperscript{99}

\begin{footnotes}


\footnotetext[95]{Tom Prideaux and the Editors of Time-Life Books, \textit{The World of Delacroix 1798-1863}, (New York: Time Incorporated, 1966), 103. The term “allegedly” is used because there is no citation in the work.}


\footnotetext[97]{Ibid.}

\footnotetext[98]{Ibid., 356.}

\footnotetext[99]{Ibid., 356.}
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The depiction showed Lady Liberty carrying the tricolore, which represented the ideals of the French Revolution: liberté, égalité, and fraternité. The people of France followed her, and those people were diverse. As seen, different classes of people were involved, according to Delacroix. The upper class student (of whom some believe may be a self-portrait of Delacroix himself) with his black hat as well as working class people followed. The older along with the younger (as depicted by the boy with the pistols) followed. As art historian, Michel Le Bris, pointed out, Delacroix used lighting to unite not only the composition, but the people.

In *Liberty Leading the People*, there is a light which is not meant to symbolize the glory of all individuals irrespective of their social class. It is an other-worldly light, concentrated in an allegorical figure, shining onto the “rabble” in order to transform them into a People. So also Napoleon, the great emblem of French honour, independence, and glory, had thrust whole multitudes into the yawning chasm of History in an effort to remake the Universe.

The “rabble” had to crawl over the dead martyrs of freedom, but they continued. The notion of liberty rallied all classes and ages. In Delacroix’s mind, this was what it meant to be French.

For the artist, sacrifice for the greater good, the collective, was paramount to the work. Though the followers of Liberty faced possible death, they continued. For Delacroix, it was liberty, equality, and fraternity that defined France. For Delacroix, it was liberty, equality, and fraternity that defined the French nation. The idea of religion was also present in the work, as Notre Dame Cathedral was in the distant sky. Was Notre Dame a reference to the role of the Catholic Church in France, or a symbol of Paris? That was debatable. What was not debatable, however, was its presence in the painting. *Liberty leading the People* illustrated Delacroix’s view of a new

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100 Prideaux *et al*, 103.

France, a France where people from different classes rallied for liberty. Even in death, the “French” people knew that others would take their place, as depicted in the image. Was this an aspect of fraternity? The idea of the collective showed itself. Delacroix was perhaps, ahead of his time when it came to these views. The critics did not receive the painting well when it was shown at the 1831 Salon, offended by how “the insurgents represented a rude class of people—urchins and workmen.”102 This suggested that French nationalism was not complete by Delacroix’s painting, but the process was in motion. Delacroix’s mental image of the French nation was lasting. His work became quite famous, currently sitting in the Louvre. He illustrated the fundamental components of what it meant to be “French.”

For the French, the nation was empowered as oppose to the individual. For the French, the “divine right of the state” replaced the “divine right of the king.”103 And, ethnicity in France, like Britain, did not matter. Even in 1880,

…anyone with some education and some intellectual pretensions would talk about race. Yet for the great mass of the French, the perceptible and scientifically justified sense of belonging to the community, the supreme personification of collectivity, was the nation, the Patrie, France.104

Englishman Thomas Paine, who neither was French nor spoke it, was elected to the French National Convention.105 According to Greenfield, these were the seeds of nationalism, French style. And spread, they did. French historian Maurice Agulhon demonstrated this point when he examined the Var region in south France. As he concluded, the people of the Var went from

102 Prideaux et al, 103.

103 Greenfield, 145-54.


105 See Hobsbawm, Nations and Nationalism since 1780.
stoutly monarchist/conservative in the 1790s to republican/liberal by 1850.\textsuperscript{106} Still, there was some debate as to how long it took France to become French. Agulhon even conceded this point. Even in 1871, “many Frenchmen felt themselves to be French, and were patriots. How many? That is a vast problem.”\textsuperscript{107} To aid in the completion of the French nation, the state utilized the educational system of the Modern Era. Maurice Agulhon continued: “France must be loved and served. All schools taught that sentiment to children, all official speeches and almost all publications repeated it to adults.”\textsuperscript{108} The author elaborated with this idea, demonstrating its influence on the military.

One of the principal authors and at the same time one of the main beneficiaries of that education was the army. The fact that the most stable and most visible element of the national festival on 14 July was a military parade, ‘the review’, is enough to show the eminent position it occupied.\textsuperscript{109}

Though there remained some debate as to when the inhabitants of France became French, French historians tended to be in agreement that by the twentieth century, the transformation was complete. French historian Eugen Weber concurred, arguing that by the turn of the century (1900), people of France (especially the peasants) finally turned into French people.\textsuperscript{110}

Starting around the beginnings of the French Revolution in 1789, French nationalism developed throughout the nineteenth century. The movement started during the Age of


\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 75.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{110} See Weber, Peasants into Frenchmen.
Enlightenment but matured during the Romantic period. Elements of both movements entered into the ideology of the nation. French nationalism resembled a hybrid of the rational nationalism of Britain and the final nationalism to develop—German nationalism.

**Germany: Romancing the Volk**

So how did German nationalism develop? Liah Greenfield postulated the answer.111 She argued that German national identity did not exist before 1806—the end of the Holy Roman Empire, but it developed quickly afterwards.112 German historian David Blackbourn agreed, stating how the German population in *Mitteleuropa* demonstrated little mobility before 1789, with eighty percent engaged in agriculture.113 In addition, the German people’s literacy rate as late as the 1780s was only five percent.114 As previously described, without mobility and communication, nationalism had little chance. Though the *Aufklärung* existed in *Mitteleuropa*, its influence on the population remained minimal compared to the next cultural movement: Romanticism.115 For these reasons, the ideas of the Enlightenment showed less influence on German nationalism as opposed to British and French nationalism.

It was in this situation when the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars occurred. Overall, their influence on *Mitteleuropa* involved stimulating the German economy by protecting

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111 Greenfield, 275-396.

112 Ibid., 277.


114 Ibid., 39.

115 The term “*Aufklärung*,” refers to the German Enlightenment. The term “*Mitteleuropa*” refers to the central Europe. This term is used here to refer to the German area within that region.
its goods from British competition and simplifying the German area, politically.\textsuperscript{116} Gone was the Holy Roman Empire and its complicated political structure; in was a new \textit{Mitteleuropa} with its simpler and reduced number of separate political entities.\textsuperscript{117} Within this framework, German nationalism stood a fighting chance. For Greenfield, it was the educated commoners and professional intellectuals that sowed the seeds of German nationalism. The idea of a German nation developed from cultural movements of the day: pietism and romanticism.\textsuperscript{118} Similar to England, and eventually all of Britain, Protestantism aided the development.\textsuperscript{119} Unlike Britain, however, (yet, similar to France), the \textit{Bildungsbürgertum}, or educated class, hit the glass ceiling.\textsuperscript{120} They reacted, influenced by the cultural movements of the time as aforementioned: pietism and romanticism. Because of German nationalisms later development, the nationalist movement rejected the \textit{Aufklärung}. The British nation, and to a lesser extent the French nation, hinged on the ideas of the Enlightenment, but the Germans followed a different path, according to Greenfield.\textsuperscript{121} The \textit{Bildungsbürgertum} mixed the fatalism of pietism with the promotion of Romanticism’s irrational feeling at the expense of reason to create a nationalistic stem with no leaves of individual liberty, toleration, or reason.\textsuperscript{122} Once again, the art of time captured the sentiment and culture of the German area. Peter von Cornelius (1783-1867), a German artist,

\textsuperscript{116} Blackbourn, 47-57.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Greenfield, 277.
\textsuperscript{119} Greenfield, 278.
\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 296-7.
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 311-52.
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 322-52.
may have alluded to these concepts of piety, fatalism, and irrational feeling in his work, *The Four Horses of the Apocalypse* (1845), as seen below.

Figure 4.  

As art historian Michel Le Bris noted,  

Cornelius was before anything else a German, nationalist to the core, bent on the realization of his dream of a great and powerful Germany: art for him was never anything but a means of fulfilling that dream…. With him everything was action and movement, exaltation of power and heroism, enraged pure-bred mares, masses of men in history-making charges.\(^{124}\)

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\(^{124}\) Le Bris, 98.
Le Bris continued about Cornelius.

He was the man that was needed, in that period of crisis, to concentrate the failing energies of all those gentle dreamers and mobilize them to serve his historical and patriotic ideal of a new monumental art—an art which would achieve the education of the German people by exalting its piety and the finest hours of its history. “Fresco painting,” he explained, “is the only way to give once more to German art the basis of a new orientation worthy of the age and of the national spirit.”

Was Peter von Cornelius the Otto von Bismarck of the artistic world? Le Bris suggested as much.

It was tantamount, under the anti-elitist pretext of an art for the people, to an attempt to reduce all creativity to illustration, fit to awaken less the sense of the divine, through the mysterious evidence of beauty, than the patriotic conscience; concerned less to lead each man, through contemplation, back to his dimension of eternity than to hurl troops onto the battlefield of history. It meant making the work of art less the place of revelation than an act of propaganda, and thus having done with that outrageous assertion, which was like the very definition of romanticism, of the autonomy of art.

What von Cornelius depicted in The Four Horses of the Apocalypse were themes of pietism and fatalism. The image showed the inevitability of the arrival of the four horsemen, as predicted in the Bible, specifically the book of “Revelation.” The artist depicted the victims as helpless, humbled before the instruments of God.

David Blackbourn also suggested that emotion and feeling, rather than reason, were components of the German identity, arguing that the German reaction against the Aufklärung emphasized both tradition and history in collective community life as well as mystery rather than transparency in individual human affairs. The German historical event, Sturm und Drang,

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125 Ibid., 99.
126 Ibid.
127 Blackbourn, 36.
sought to break down the confines of rationalism in the name of feeling. This was a nation (also shaped by the French Revolution and Napoleon) that viewed the French and the West (and their ideas of the Enlightenment) with disdain, viewed its own language as an object of worship, venerated the Volk and its purity, and ignored ideas of tolerance (another gift of the Enlightenment). The leftist ideas of the French Revolution did in fact influence the Germans, but in a negative way. After 1792, Germans were typically moderate to conservative. From these seeds, according to Greenfield, the German nation viewed the modern World (West, capitalist) as evil; viewed the modern man as alienated; stressed the notion that social nature was true nature of man—a fusion of individual into collective; advocated that social change would allow the “real man,” or Friedrich Nietzsche’s Übermensch, to develop; and relied on intellectuals to bring forth this change.

From this, repression and reaction were the ideas of the German nobility, both after the July Revolution in Paris of 1830 and the failed attempt at unification in 1848. Was it surprising that guns, not butter, produced the German state in 1871? The pre-existing German states played “follow the leader,” and that leader was Prussia, due to its economic and military strength. As for the orchestrator of this momentous episode, Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor

128 Ibid., 37.
129 Greenfield, 358-78.
130 Blackbourn, 47-57.
131 Greenfield, 386-95. What is also interesting, as Greenfield points out, is how both Marxism and National Socialism, ideologies supposedly on opposite ends of the political spectrum, develop from this same stock of Pietism, Romanticism, and resentment of the West.
132 Blackbourn, 47-57, 207-224.
133 Ibid., 245-52.
of Prussia, saw the impressive force of nationalism, but to him, he believed it could be used as an anti-liberal force.134 As German historian Otto Pflanze pointed out, Bismarck equated state nationalism with dynastic loyalty; it was not necessarily about the Volk but rather about the Kaiser.135 (This formula was the reverse of France’s experience.) German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and his idea of the Volksgeist did not quite fit Bismarck’s bill.136 Bismarck’s astute political skills and timely, limited conflicts (with Junker dominated Prussia leading the way) paved the way for unification in 1871. For historian David Blackbourn, however, this was just the beginning.

Accounts of German unification generally take 1871 as the end point; actually it was just the beginning. When a notably unenthusiastic William accepted the imperial crown, Germany existed on paper, but it lacked widespread legitimacy as well as seasoned institutions.137

The fusion of the German nation continued based on the ideas from romanticism. The role of piety played no small part. The piety strengthened, thanks in part to the remembrance of Martin Luther. A “Lutherfeier,” or Luther celebration, was on the horizon, and a sense of German “manifest destiny” developed.138

Another element of German nationalism, or “romantic nationalism,” involved an element of fear. The state of Germany was new to map. There existed a sense, amidst the German


135 Ibid.

136 Ibid. Pflanze discusses Herder’s Volksgeist.

137 Blackbourn, 259.

138 See Roger Chickering, Imperial German and the Great War, 1914-1918, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). This is also discussed in Audoin-Rouzeau and Becker, 14-18 Understanding the Great War, 116-7.
people, that the outside world helped prevent an earlier state. For the German nation, an element of paranoia caused concern that the outside world might break up the new Germany. This mindset of the German people caused an overly hostile and aggressive nature of Germany. “Preventive measures” were necessary, in their psyches, to keep Germany united.

Thus, Liah Greenfield’s model proved fruitful. British nationalism, or “rational nationalism,” relied on mobility, religion, capitalism, individualism, and the Enlightenment, becoming Civic Type I. French nationalism, “or rational-romantic nationalism,” relied on mobility, individualism through the collective, and the Enlightenment, thus becoming Civic Type II. The French nation presented a hybrid. German nationalism, or “romantic nationalism,” relied on the collective, anti-capitalism, and anti-Enlightenment, therefore becoming Ethnic Type III.

There was the rub!

Thus, there was a distinction. British, French, and German nationalism all demonstrated variations. Nineteenth century French philosopher, Ernest Renan, alluded to the differences, (especially with regard to the German nation), as well as the potential dangers when he posed the question, “Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?” in an 1882 lecture at the Sorbonne:

The Germanic family, according to the theory I am expounding here, has the right to reassemble the scattered limbs of the Germanic order, even when these limbs are not asking to be joined together again. The right of the Germanic order over such-and-such a province is stronger than the right of the inhabitants of that province over themselves. There is thus created a kind of primordial right analogous to the divine right of kings; an ethnographic principle is substituted for a national one. This is a very great error, which, if it were to become dominant, would destroy European civilization. The primordial right of races is as narrow and as perilous for genuine progress as the national principle is just and legitimate.139

Renan continued, demonstrating not only the differences, but also the delusions.

139 Renan, 47
Ethnographic considerations have therefore played no part in the constitution of modern nations. France is [at once] Celtic, Iberic, and Germanic. Germany is Germanic, Celtic and Slav…. The British isles, considered as a whole, present a mixture of Celtic and Germanic blood, the proportions of which are singularly difficult to define.\footnote{Ibid., 48.}

Though similarities existed between the rational nationalism of Britain and the romantic-rational nationalism of France, distinctions remained. In France, the Dreyfus Affair demonstrated the difference.\footnote{See Jean-Denis Bredin, The Affair: The Case of Alfred Dreyfus, Jeffrey Mehlman, translator, (New York: George Braziller, 1986).} After France’s loss to Prussia in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1, the new Third Republic sought reasons for the loss. Alfred Dreyfus, of Jewish descent, was a French officer in the army. He was accused of spying for the Germans (after the Franco-Prussian War), convicted, and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1894. As Émile Zola, a French journalist proved, in \textit{J’Accuse!}, Dreyfus was in fact innocent. Dreyfus, because he was part Jewish, was singled out and made into a scapegoat. Eventually, Dreyfus received his freedom in 1906. Was he not French enough? Did his individual liberty suffer at the expense of French unity? Historian Susan Dunn, may have shed some light on this matter in her comparative work on the French Revolution and the American Revolution.\footnote{See Susan Dunn, Sister Revolutions: French Lightning, American Light, (New York: Faber & Faber, 1999).} Her main argument in her work suggested that the French emphasized unity at the expense individual freedom during the French Revolution. The liberty of the French people as a whole was more important than the liberty of each French person. Delacroix’s work suggested this idea as well. After arguing that the American Revolution stressed the complete opposite, she looked toward Great Britain as the ideal situation. For Dunn, Great Britain enabled individual liberty without sacrificing unity. Her
work examined a different topic at an earlier stage, but those seeds were still present. For the British, allowances of differing peoples allowed for unity based more on civil liberties. Those seeds influenced the development of nationalism, a rational nationalism. Benjamin Disraeli, of Jewish heritage, demonstrated this contrast. While France, a republican government, saw Dreyfus as “the other,” Benjamin Disraeli, only four years earlier, represented the idea of “Britishness.” Disraeli served as Prime Minister, and he received consideration as one of the best Prime Ministers that ever held that post in the history of Britain.

Nationalism existed in 1914. Was it imagined? Perhaps. Was it real? Yes! The people of Great Britain, France, and Germany perceived themselves to be part of something bigger, part of a community. Though their reasoning for this perception possessed possible flaws, their perception still existed. In the era of modernity where alienated industrial workers replaced communities of farmers and peasants, Europeans sought and clung to ideas of belonging. They looked to the past, as nationalist author, Anthony P. Smith noted. “The return to the past is necessary because of our need for immortality through the memory of posterity which the seeming finality of death threatens.” Not only did nationalism exist in 1914, the nationalist movements were different in Britain, France, and Germany. These dissimilarities influenced how people, and soldiers, viewed the nation. From there, these variations resulted in diverging experiences of the British, French, and German soldiers.

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143 See Roberts et al, A History of England, Volume 2. It is ironic that this paper relies on a work entitled A History of England when this paper is, in fact, trying to demonstrate the existence of “Britain.” The Roberts et al work, in this author’s opinion, is mislabeled.

CHAPTER THREE
THE GERMAN SOLDIER: THE BRUTAL ROMANTIC

Did soldiery and nationalism even matter?¹ That question presented itself due to the effective artillery and clothing of the German army. In a letter dated 9 November, Karl Josenhans, a student of theology at Tübingen when the war broke out, described what he saw with regard to German artillery fire and its effectiveness:

…One murderous instrument with which we have the advantage is the big trench-mortar. They hurl huge shells about a thousand feet into the air and they fall almost vertically. I have been able to observe their effect narrowly this time. Earth and branches are flung into the air to the height of a house, and although he shells fell eighty yards away from us, the ground under us shook. During the explosions I was looking through a periscope into the French trench opposite and could see the terrified men running away to the rear. But somebody was evidently standing behind them with a revolver, for one after another came crawling back again. This war is simply a matter of hounding men to death, and that is a degrading business. We can indeed be thankful that we are not to blame for it, for even as it is one often feels absolutely sickened by it. But one thing I must say—the sight of the dead, even with the most ghastly wounds, has no effect on me at all.²

As previously mentioned, both artillery and firepower aided the German cause.³ Yet, more to the German story existed. The influence of German culture, including the mentality of the army and romantic nationalism, shaped the experience of war for the German soldiers. The troopers took these notions into war only to find that enduring the ordeal of combat caused both

¹ As mentioned in the introduction, the reader should be aware of the limitations of this chapter. It relies heavily on evidence in English. It also relies heavily on letters from students; therefore, it does not provide a good cross-section of German society. The chapter uses the experience of only one member of a minority group in Germany to make a point.


³ See Chapter One.
disillusionment and devotion. Camaraderie, however, remained a constant theme. Limitations also existed, both in the membership of the German nation and in the professionalism of the soldier. This restriction in professionalism, influenced by not only nationalism but also by training from above, resulted in acts of barbarism.

**Enthusiasm for German Romantic Nationalism**

For the German soldiers of 1914, there was this sense of loyalty to the ideas of German nationalism, or the *Vaterland*, especially when the announcement of war travelled throughout the country. Enthusiasm for the upcoming conflict trumped hesitation, and the words of the future combatants for a “better Germany” supported this idea. Hesitation existed, however. Not all future German combatants shared such enthusiasm. A student of law studying in Freiburg in Baden, Franz Blumenfeld, suggested as much when he wrote his mother on 1 August 1914. He told her that he needed to join the army for war, not so much because he possessed “war-fever” or enthusiasm for the conflict, but rather so he would not feel cowardly.4 In a taped interview years after the war, Corporal Stefan Westmann voiced his lack of enthusiasm when he went forward during that fateful summer:

> I was a medical student when I received my call-up papers. They ordered me to report for military duty in a clean state and free of vermin at an infantry regiment in Freiburg, in Baden. We had no idea of any impending war, we had no idea that the danger of war existed. We served in our blue and red uniform, but on the 1st of August mobilisation orders came and we put on our field grey. At 2 o’clock in the morning of the 4th of August we marched out of Freiburg with torches—silent, without any music, without any singing, and with no enthusiasm. We were really weighed down by our kit,

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which weighed 75 lb. per man. We crossed the Rhine over a very wobbly pontoon bridge into Alsace.⁵

According to Westmann, his regiment showed little as well.

Still, enthusiasm eclipsed hesitation. Walter Limmer, who was born in Plauen in Vogtland and was a Student of Law in Leipzig, echoed the ardor in a letter dated 3 August 1914: “Hurrah! at [sic] last I have got my orders….”⁶ Limmer was proud to fight for the fatherland, and he felt shame if people did not realize his future involvement. “This morning I met a young lady I know, and I was almost ashamed to let her see me in civilian clothes.”⁷ His feelings toward war continued when he penned, “…I don’t belong in the peaceful Leipzig any more.”⁸ Herbert Salzbach confirmed this enthusiasm, writing in his journal on 1 August 1914, “Try as I may I simply can’t convey the splendid spirit and wild enthusiasm that has come over us all. We feel we’ve been attacked, and the idea that we have to defend ourselves gives us unbelievable strength.”⁹ Private Ascan Klee Gobert also described this sentiment for war, “This experience


⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Sulzbach, With the German Guns, 22. What is also interesting is that Sulzbach is of Jewish birth, and he uses the term “we.” For Sulzbach, he saw himself as a German, thus suggesting the power of nationalism even when understood differently by non-ethnic Germans. This receives further attention later.
for a young boy of twenty who eight or nine weeks ago was at home was very new and adventurous.”

When Herbert Sulzbach of Frankfurt heard of the 28 June assassination, he wrote, “What follows from this is not clear. You feel that a stone has begun to roll downhill and that dreadful things may be in store for Europe.” Sulzbach decided to postpone his plans and join up because, as he put it, “I’m twenty, you see, a fine age for soldiering, I don’t know a better.” By 14 July, he was attached to the 2nd Bavarian Field Artillery Regiment, and he then recalled his thoughts on the announcement of mobilization on 1 August, “The Kaiser orders mobilization of the Army and Navy. That word ‘mobilize’, it’s weird, you can’t grasp what it means. First mobilization day is 2 August.” Still, Sulzbach began to demonstrate an anxiousness to get to the front, writing, “Try as I may I simply can’t convey the splendid spirit and wild enthusiasm that has come over us all. We feel we’ve been attacked, and the idea that we have to defend ourselves gives us unbelievable strength.” Part of the romantic nationalism was a dislike of the other. Sulzbach recorded such contempt, writing that, “…people feel a terrible hatred for the Russians and the French.”

The march toward the front did not change the attitude. While riding to the front via train, the enthusiasm did not subside. “Such enthusiasm!” exclaimed Walter Limmer in his letter

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11 Sulzbach, 21.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., 22.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid., 23.
dated 7 August 1914. On 2 September 1914, Herbert Sulzbach also noted the continuation, writing, “I was seized by a strange feeling, a mixture of happiness, exhilaration, pride, the emotion of saying good-bye, and the consciousness of the greatness of the hour…. We travelled away through the country I love [Germany]….“ Ernst Rumpp, on 5 August 1914 in his journal, shared this as well, though with a degree of caution: “The enthusiasm is big, but we do not misjudge the opponent.” Hans Wigger recorded the vocal expression of the German soldiers during a march forward on 20 August 1914, writing, “and everywhere the sound of the song of the fatherland through the night.”

This enthusiasm for war reflected the culture of German romantic nationalism. Nationalism expressed itself in the words of German combatants. This became clearer. The student of law, Walter Limmer, expressed as much in his letter to his mother dated 3 August 1914:

Dear Mother, please, please, try to keep constantly before your mind what I have realized, in the midst of conflicting emotions, since I said good-bye to you yesterday, namely that if at this time we think of ourselves and those who belong to us, we shall be petty and weak. We must have a broad outlook and think of our nation, our Fatherland, of God—then we shall be brave and strong.

16 Limmer, 3.

17 Sulzbach, 26. My brackets.

18 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, MSG 2/ 2385, Freiburg, 1. (Ernst Rumpp) “Die Begiesterung ist gross, doch auch die Gegner warden nicht verkannt.”

19 Bundesarchiv-Militärarchiv, MSG 2/ 2526, Freiburg, 26. (Hans Wiggers) “…und überall tönte Gesang von Vaterlandsliedern durch die Nacht.”

20 Limmer, 1.
The Vaterland mattered, and that was why Limmer thought more about just himself and his mother. He argued this point to its possible conclusion, when he wrote his family again on 7 August 1914.

Every soldier must, to start with, be, as I was a week ago, oppressed by the first mental picture of horrors which are no longer mere possibilities, but actually approaching realities; and on the day of the first battle the feeling of dread is bound to try and get possession of one’s heart again, but now it won’t find us shaky or unprepared. I personally have entirely regained my self-possession. I have thought out my position as if I had already done with this world—as if I were certain of not coming home again; and that gives me peace and security. Dear Father, good Mother, beloved Brothers and Sisters, please, please don’t think me cruel for saying this, but it would be a good thing if already you too would, with brave hearts and firm self-control, get accustomed to the idea that you will not see me or any of my brothers again. Then if bad news does come, you will be able to receive it much more calmly. But if we all do come back, then we can accept that joy as an unexpected and all the more gracious and glorious gift of God. You will believe that I really mean this. The matter is much too sacred to me for me to be capable of merely making phrases in what I have just said.

In any case I mean to go into this business “like Blücher”. That is the simple duty of every one of us. And this feeling is universal among the soldiers, especially since the night when England’s declaration of war was announced in the barracks. We none of us got to sleep till three o’clock in the morning, we were so full of excitement, fury, and enthusiasm. It is a joy to go to the Front with such comrades. We are bound to be victorious! Nothing else is possible in the face of such determination to win. My dear ones, be proud that you live in such times and in such a nation, and that you too have the privilege of sending several of those you loved into this glorious struggle.21

Limmer understood the sacrifice, and he was willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for the nation. This fatalistic view, a central component of romantic nationalism, existed. He continued to note the influence of nationalism while on the train to the front: “This hour is one such as seldom strikes in the life of a nation, and it is so marvelous and moving as to be in itself sufficient compensation for many sufferings and sacrifices.”22 A 24 September letter from another former law student, Franz Blumenfeld, to his mother, demonstrated that train rides

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21 Ibid., 2-3.

22 Ibid., 3.
apparently brought out thoughts of nationalism: “I want you to know that if I am killed, I give my life gladly and willingly.”23 Why was he willing to do this? He conveniently answers this question, writing,

…why I should have volunteered for the war? Of course it was not from any enthusiasm for war in general, nor because I thought it would be a fine thing to kill a great many people or otherwise distinguish myself. On the contrary, I think that war is a very, very evil thing, and I believe that even in this case it might have been averted by a more skilful diplomacy. But, now that it has been declared, I think it is a matter of course that one should feel oneself so much a member of the nation that one must unite one’s fate as closely as possible with that of the whole. And even if I were convinced that I could serve my Fatherland and its people better in peace than in war, I should think it just as perverse and impossible to let any such calculations weigh with me at the present moment as it would be for a man going to the assistance of somebody who was drowning, to stop to consider who the drowning man was and whether his own life were not perhaps the more valuable of the two. For what counts is always the readiness to make a sacrifice, not the object for which the sacrifice is made.

This war seems to me, from all that I have heard, to be something so horrible, inhuman, mad, obsolete, and in every way depraving, that I have firmly resolved, if I do come back, to do everything in my power to prevent such a thing from ever happening again in the future….24

Blumenfield demonstrated both a willingness for sacrifice and a seemingly blind allegiance to the nation. Trains, indeed, brought out enthusiasm for the nation.

Herbert Weisser, who was born in Lissa, desired to be an architect.25 He went to a technical high school in Charlottenburg, hoping to, “be to the German people a true German Master-Builder.”26 He also wanted children, as he mentioned to his significant other in a letter on the fifth day of mobilization: “I had hope too to give to the German Fatherland a few boys

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23 Blumenfeld, 18.

24 Ibid., 19-20.


26 Ibid.
and girls who could not be forced to waste their gifts in struggling vainly against their own instincts, as you and I have done, or in fighting against the overwhelming false prejudices of their time.”  

He dreamed of his future, but he set those dreams aside for the Fatherland: “But we must not think of that now. Our present task is to defend all that German culture has built up through a thousand years of work, in toil and sweat and blood.” The trooper demonstrated a key component of German romantic nationalism: the fear of the outside world destroying the German nation. He felt that Germany was ill-treated by the other nations, and that was why war came.

I am not in the least afraid of bullets, but I am filled with bitterness and sorrow because so much youth and latent talent must be sacrificed by people simply because they cannot rise above their own contemptible envy and ill-will. It is a just retribution for not having conquered these weaknesses in themselves. But there are also people who have not such petty feelings, who have conquered them, and who could and so gladly would help others to do the same—they also are sacrificed….  

He continued the central themes of romantic nationalism in a 27 September letter, writing,

Whatever I may do in the war cannot be called production [he is an architect, after all]…. But, on the other hand, one cannot stand by and see the German people and all that they have created during hundreds of years destroyed by other nations. The only lightning-conductor is burning hatred and contempt for those few men—if they can still possibly be described by that name—who have brought the war about. Those people are lucky who can hold the enemy’s whole nation responsible and believed that they are aiming their rifles at the actual culprits. I personally cannot feel any hatred against individual Frenchmen—on the contrary, I regret every young life which will be cut off through my instrumentality. Also I cannot rejoice unreservedly in our victories; but do you know what I do thoroughly and boundlessly rejoice in? In the German character, which now has an opportunity of exhibiting itself in shining splendor; in the faultless functioning of the gigantic machine to which each individual can and does contribute; in the discipline show by our troops in their treatment of the inhabitants of enemy country; in the eagerness with which each one works for the general good; and in the firm, unshakable

27 Ibid., 104.

28 Ibid., 105.

29 Ibid., 106.
sense of justice which is displayed on the German side on every occasion. The great strength of our noble people does not lie in wielding the sword, but in its sense of the high responsibility of making the best use of its gifts, and in its inner worth as the people of culture. Other nations can tear down and destroy in war, but we understand, better than any other, how to build up, and of this I have been certain only since the beginning of the war. Therefore I do not trouble much as to whether the war has a positive or negative end for us.\textsuperscript{30}

Several members of the German army played the waiting game, anxious to do their duty for the nation. Walter Roy, born in Hamburg was a medical student at Jena when the war began, and he waited anxiously at Döberitz to get to the front.\textsuperscript{31} He realized that his life before the war was gone, but he still believed in the cause, writing,

> How I lived and loved is now like a dream, a passing mood, the sweet remembrance of a passing mood. Only one thing is real now—the war! And the only thing that now inspires and uplifts one is love for the German Fatherland and the desire to fight and risk all for Emperor and Empire. All else is thrust into the background and is like a dream, like a distant rosy cloud in the evening sky.\textsuperscript{32}

The link between the German nation and the Kaiser also appeared. The former Jena medical student continued, realizing how he must sacrifice for the nation: “I am entirely occupied with thoughts of war and suffering and with enthusiasm for our holiest duty.”\textsuperscript{33} For Walter Roy, he was anxious to sacrifice for his people and his emperor, writing that, “…then if only I might give

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 107-8.
\item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
my life for our Germany, for my Kaiser, for my Fatherland!”34 He did provide the ultimate sacrifice: the war took him on 24 April, 1915 at the Heights of Combres, near Les Eparges.35

Emil Alefeld, a technical student in Munich when war broke, was born in Dramstadt.36 While waiting to embark to the front, he penned a letter on 8 October from Strasburg, in which he reiterated the sentiment of German nationalism:

We are looking forward to it. God will protect us. I have not been able to accomplish enough in the world yet, though of course it is possible that my country may disappoint me in many ways after the war, and that we may owe our victory merely to the fact that our enemies are much worse than we are. I comfort myself with that reflection, in case the Almighty should have issued a grave decree concerning me. But all the same we—I use the work in the narrowest sense of the few people with ideals—are Germans; we are fighting for our country and are shedding our blood in the hope that the survivors may be worthy of our sacrifice. To me it is a battle for an idea—the Fata Morgana of a pure, true, honourable Germany, free from wickedness and deceit. And if we go under with this hope in our hearts, that is perhaps better than by a great effort to have won a victory and then to see that it was only an outward triumph without any spiritual benefit.37

Elements of pietism and fatalism manifested themselves, as well as the idea of a better, truer German nation. The influence of Nietzsche Übermensch appeared.

A student of agriculture at Jena, Fritz Philipps planned ahead in case of death.38 On 1 October, he wrote a, “FAREWELL Letter, only to be opened if I am killed.”39 The letter read as follows:

34 Ibid., 70.

35 Ibid., 69.


37 Ibid.

I am going with all my heart, freely and willingly, into the war, never doubting but that Germany will bring it to a favourable and victorious end. I wish that there may be no laying down of arms until we have won a real world-victory. I need scarcely say that I hate war in itself, but for that very reason I will fight and take part in this great affair and willingly die, if I can thereby contribute to the transformation of World War into World Peace….Do not have my body brought home even if that is possible; let me lie there where I have fought and fallen. Do not put on any mourning for me; let nobody feel any constraint; but rejoice that you too have been allowed to offer a sacrifice on the altar of the Fatherland.40

The culture of romantic nationalism existed amongst these future German combatants, combatants who would die for their *Vaterland*. The troopers, overall, accepted their fate, and were willing to make the sacrifice.

**The Experience of Fire**

How the German soldiers reacted under fire suggested that their attachment to German nationalism was not necessarily a fleeting thought; yet, some combatants did rethink the notion of nationalism and Germany. The trial by fire requirement would prove how the soldiers fought and what they truly believed. Lieutenant Manfred von Richthofen wrote about his trial by fire when he spotted French soldiers ahead:

There were about two hundred to two hundred and fifty French riflemen over there. We couldn’t move to the left of forward because the enemy was there, and to the right was the wall of rock; therefore, we had to go back. Yes, but it wasn’t so simple. The way was quite narrow and it led right by the enemy-fortified forest’s edge. To take cover was also useless; therefore I had to go back. I was the last one. In spite of my orders, all the others had bunched together and offered the Frenchmen a good target. Perhaps that was the reason why I escaped. I brought only four men back. This baptism of fire was not as much fun as I thought.41

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40 Ibid., 83.
For Krozingen (in Baden) born Aldred E. Vaeth, there was little change in his attitude: “I don’t think…that I have changed in the least.”\textsuperscript{42} The philosophy student who studied at Heidelberg continued in his 4 November letter, stating how “only the weather” makes him want to return home.\textsuperscript{43} Wutzenow born Hans Stegemann, who spent time studying at Elberswalde, also described his trial by fire during the advance to the Marne on 28 August:

“…Our men, like heroes, did not yield a foot! Sergeant Struck, a good comrade, fell close to me, shot through the lungs, and died immediately.… Corporal von Heimburg fell saying, with a smile: ‘We shall win all the same!’

On the day after the battle I was in the church, which has been turned into a hospital. All the men with lung-wounds were getting on very well, almost better than the slightly wounded.… Their one and only question was: ‘How are things going, Sergeant? Is it all right again?’ ‘Lads, I’ve come straight from the line; everything is going well, we have advanced a bit. The English haven’t half caught it on the jaw!’ Then they smiled and fell asleep like happy children. They are all perfectly calm and confident, and suffer uncomplainingly, but it is dreadful to see the dangerously wounded, especially those who are raving in delirium.

I rode over the battle-field yesterday. There were about ten English dead to one of ours. I will write no more about the battle-field. It is difficult to imagine how anybody came out of it unharmed. One gets quite cold-blooded and indifferent.

All the armies are marching on Paris. We, too!”\textsuperscript{44}

There existed an exhilaration of battle in his writing, but not necessarily for German nationalism.

After the Marne and the German army’s retreat, he continued describing the fight in a letter dated 18 September from Coucy-le-Château:


\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., 164. What was also interesting about the letter was his statement that goes against S. L. A. Marshall’s “ratio-of-fire” hypothesis. He wrote, “Now and then the firing gets a little more intense; then one look for something to aim at and goes man-shooting.” Ibid., 165.

\textsuperscript{44} Hans Stegemann, “Hans Stegemann, Student of Forestry, High School, Eberswalde,” German Students’ War Letters, Philipp Witkop, ed., A. F. Wedd, ed. and translator, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929), 244-58, 244-5.
The enemy has got the range, and now the fun begins. Ssss...rrr...sch! it goes, as if a giant were beating the foliage of the oak-trees with his stick. All the horses of the fifth ammunition-wagon—three on the right and three on the left—are lying struggling, with their legs in the air, though those of the next are untouched. The gunners are crawling about on the ground. Many have been killed. A moment ago the column was hale and hearty: now it looks as if somebody had brought an enormous fly-clapper down on it. My wagon was in the middle of it all.

The whistling continues..., the English won’t run away, and nothing upsets the composure of a Holsteiner. When a ‘heavy’ comes whistling over they grin, and imitate the sound with their lips. On seeing my pipe one of them says, ‘By gosh, that’s a good idea!’ pulls out a battered cigar and begins to smoke: ‘that pretty nearly got spoilt in my pocket!’ They are equally self-possessed. One takes off his shako, which is full of bullet-holes and looks at it: ‘Well, as long as it don’t let the rain in,’ he says, and puts it on again.45

Stegemann’s account suggested he viewed the ordeal of combat as a job, possibly a profession.

For Herbert Sulzbach on 3 October, trial by fire was enthralling, especially when you were involved with the German artillery:

The buglers sound ‘Fix bayonets for assault’. It was incredible hearing the signal to go into action; you couldn’t help thinking of the poem we had at school, The Bugler of Vionville. A terrible street battle began. We were right up at the front; the first barricades had been put up in front of a railway embankment, and the infantry swarmed over them all with bayonets fixed, and now a dreadful fire was directed at us, a hail of shots from every window, cellar-opening and skylight. We unlimber, firing into these narrow faubourg streets; it rumbles and crackles like hell, and we stand with our horses only ten paces behind the guns, so that it is nearly impossible to hang on to the wildly rearing animals; but hold them we must, for very soon the guns will have to be taken forward or back by these very horses. There’s no question of retreat with our guns! The façade of one house collapses, mounted patrol horses tear along the streets, and the first dead and wounded are lying about. You can’t see at all where the firing is coming from. I stand, or rather hang, on the reins between my two horses: No. 2 gun keeps on firing and firing. Fires are starting in several places. The hellish noise makes it almost impossible to communicate with the command posts, so that our section has to beat a retreat with the infantry out of this dreadful street, and in so doing we encounter the main body, which has meanwhile also started street fighting. The jam of vehicles and men in this street is unimaginable, and in a few minutes it has accumulated to a scene of real devastation.

After we had reassembled outside the town, we tried to get into Lille by another route, but were met by further fire, especially from machine-guns, and had a number of

wounded in the new position. We went back once more, bivouacked in a meadow and lay in the straw recuperating from our generous baptism of fire.46

The excitement at Lille continued.

We move into a new position above another Lille suburb, dig the guns in and open fire. Enemy artillery fire replies, but is ineffective. As we limber up from this position we come under heavy infantry fire, and we only manage to move to a new position by using the greatest skill and repeatedly throwing ourselves flat on the ground. The city is brought under continuous fire.

Once more, we are passed by an exceptionally large quantity of German cavalry…. [On 6 October,] we witness an unforgettable scene: one cavalry regiment after another rides past us. The 23rd and 24th Dragoons from Darmstadt, mounted chasseurs from Trier, regiments from Metz, Karlsruhe, Bruchsal, Mulhouse and Cassel; they trot past us for hours and hours; they look terrific with their lances, and you feel that something very big is going to happen. You are actually there to see military units advance and take up their appointed places, you feel that a great battle is in preparation and you are suffused with hope and excitement.47

There was something to the fight for Herbert Sulzbach. He noted, “You still feel it is something wonderful to be one of the millions who are able to join in the fighting, and you feel it is really necessary.”48

In a letter dated 21 October, Martin Drescher, who was a student of Philosophy in Berlin—the heart of Germany, noted his experience during a bad day of fighting:

Our guns had not come up and we had to march against enemy artillery, infantry and machine-guns—no, not march, but advance by leaps and bounds. We never even had a chance to fire; it was a case of running the gauntlet….There was a deathly silence; burning villages all round; the groans of the slightly and dangerously wounded; and on top of that to have to dig a man-deep trench.49

46 Sulzbach, 31-2.

47 Ibid., 32.

48 Ibid., 33.

The German soldier who studied agriculture at Jena, Fritz Philipps, described his experience under fire near Ypres. He was an observer who refused to take shelter despite accurate artillery fire from the enemy.50 “I shut my eyes again for a moment, gave myself a shake, and then went on observing quite calmly.”51 He later died near Cizkowice, Galicia on 2 May 1915.52

Karl Aldag, born in Obernkirchen, studied philosophy as well, only he went to the school in Marburg.53 When war came, he decided to get into the action. His action, or trial by fire, soon came in mid-October when his regiment relieved a Bavarian regiment near Calais:

The fun began on the first day about noon, when shells and volleys of infantry-fire simply poured into the village. We took refuge in the cellars, but as the attack came nearer, we had to go out to defend the place. We had no trenches or any other kind of cover and were fully exposed to shell-fire the whole afternoon. Those were difficult hours, full of fear and horror. In the evening the firing started again and lasted till about half-past nine. The contrast with the peacefully falling shades of evening was terrible and melancholy; the stars shone so quietly and brilliantly down upon the battle—that really was beautiful.

On October 19th they attacked. Artillery-fire from three sides. The infantry go so near that we could hear their words of command. Then suddenly [sic] our guns started, and that stopped them. Then a merry firing began; they suffered heavy losses, and soon all was quiet. If they had been a little bolder we should have been done for that day. We were standing in a horseshoe, but all the same our casualties were slight. I can’t describe my frame of mind on that afternoon. Not for a moment did I feel any fear of death; one simply abandons oneself to fate—if one is going to be hit, one will be hit.

The French didn’t attack again after that, though they fired on us often and violently, especially the English naval-guns, which make a terrific noise.54

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50 Philipps, 84.
51 Ibid.
52 Ibid., 83.
54 Ibid., 29-30.
Mecklenburg born Ulrich Timm, a former student of theology at Rostock, described his ordeal by fire in an October letter from Flanders:

The whole of October 23rd we had been lying as Artillery Cover by the village of Merkem, not far from Dixmuide. In the evening, a little before 7, came a request from the infantry in front of us for support, as they wanted to storm the enemy position. Immediately we swarmed out of our trench, fixed bayonets and doubled to the attack, ‘Hurrah, Hurrah!’

It was a complete failure, for, in the first place, there were more of our own men in front of us, being constantly fired at not only by the enemy opposite but by their own comrades in the rear. Not a few were killed by German bullets during those days. In the second place we were still a mile or more away from the enemy position when we began storming, so that we were tired before the attack really started.

After we had stormed through a thicket and some fields of roots and crossed a broad, deep trench (not without risking our lives, for the bullets were whistling past our ears), we were supposed to capture a wide, exposed hill. I was quite prepared to stick my bayonet into the body of the first Englishman I could see, when suddenly I was seized by some irresistible force and hurled to the ground. For a moment I didn’t know where I was, but I soon pulled myself together. Hallo! what’s happened? Aha, you’ve caught it, there’s blood running out of your trousers! Just try and see if you can stand up. Quite all right. It can’t be so bad then, but get down again quickly or you may catch it again.55

He waited through the night for help, and he even saw stretcher-bearers collecting the wounded nearby.56 However, they did not return for him, nor for other wounded soldiers; “One who could still walk a little, started off. He had hardly gone a hundred yards when I saw him fall. Those damned snipers!”57 The enemy showed no mercy on this occasion. Timm spent another night

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56 Ibid., 139.

57 Ibid.
between lines, but was able to get back to the German side. He gave himself another seven
months, for he died on 20 June 1915 near Zurawno, Galicia.

Baptism occurred for Walter Limmer as well, as he wrote about his experience in combat
in a letter dated 9 September. While engaged with the enemy south of Chalons, he noted:

This ghastly battle is still raging—for the fourth day! Up till now, like most battles in
this war, it has consisted almost entirely of an appalling artillery duel. I am writing this
letter in a sort of grave-like hole which I dug for myself in the firing-line. The shells are
falling so thick to-day, both before and behind us, that one may regard it as only thanks to
the special mercy of God if one comes out of it safe and sound.

The German combatants received their “baptism of fire.” With that test, the true psyche exposed
itself.

**Reaction**

The results of the German soldiers’ baptism proved diverse. For some, the experience of
war produced a sense of disillusionment, and with that, a weakened attachment to the Fatherland.
Walter Limmer’s attitude, after his “baptism of fire,” appeared to alter his previous enthusiasm.
In a letter dated 20 September, he was happy to receive a wound, allowing his return home and
away from war and his comrades.

Yes, I can hardly believe it myself, but it’s true: I am on my way to you and
home. Oh, how happy I am to see a brighter world again, instead of that world of horror!
At last I am free from that secret dread which always haunted me, that I should never see
you and your world again, for the Fate has presented me with the hope that, unless some
unforeseen obstacle should arise, I shall look into your dear eyes once more.

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58 Ibid., 139-40.
59 Ibid., 137.
60 Limmer, 3-4.
61 Ibid.
62 Ibid., 4.
Unfortunately for Walter Limmer and the Limmer family, that “unforeseen obstacle” was tetanus, and he died four days after writing this letter.63

The ordeal of fire affected Herbert Weisser, the aspiring architect, as well. He demonstrated this point by March 1915. He wrote,

…our nation was as I believe, on the right road towards self-regeneration from within, though the powers which were to bring about this regeneration were very limited. Now comes the war, tears everything out of the process of being and developing, and deprives us of just what we most needed—the youth of the present generation, who were growing up with progressive ideas.

I always imagined beforehand, what I now find abundantly confirmed: that the notions which our parents, our books and our history lessons had given us of war are either entirely false, or at least incomplete and therefore misleading. We were given to understand that heroic deeds were of the essence and the most frequent result of war. But is that so? How many such actions are in any case simply brought about by the impulse of the moment, perhaps by the bloodthirstiness and unjust hatred which a nation’s political views spread among all its members and for which they have to suffer? Of course there are many quiet, unobserved acts of heroism, but are these really so much rarer in time of peace? And what of the drunkenness; the brutality both in the æsthetic and ethical sense; the spiritual and physical slothfulness, when does one ever hear of them in accounts of war? And the slack ideas with regard to morality and marriage, what about them? All this was going through my mind at that time. It was no slack disinclination that I felt, but a profound sadness which nevertheless was just as productive of determined action as the enthusiasm of other (better?) men.64

Weisser never became an architect—he died at Ypres on 25 May 1915.65

Magdeburg born Kurt Peterson, who spent time studying philosophy in Berlin, described his thoughts on the reality of war after his trial by fire while writing a letter from West Flanders on 25 October:

63 Ibid.

64 Weisser, 109-10. I felt it was necessary to see his ideas through the rest of his correspondence due to his ideal views about Germany when he was waiting to leave for the front.

65 Ibid., 104.
It is Sunday. We are blessed with glorious sunshine. How glad I am to greet it once more after all the horrors! I thought never to see it again! Terrible were the days which now lie behind us. Dixmuide brought us a baptism of fire such as scarcely any troops on active service can have experienced before: out of 180 men, only 110 unwounded; the 9th and 10th Companies had to be reorganized as one; several Captains killed and wounded; one Major dangerously wounded. Our Regiment suffered horribly. It was complimented by the Division.

What experiences one goes through during such an attack! It makes one years older! Death roars around one; a hail of machine-gun and rifle bullets; every moment one expects to be hit; one is certain of it. One’s memory is in perfect working order; one sees and feels quite clearly. One thinks of one’s parents. Then there rise in every man thoughts of defiance and of rage and finally a cry for help: away with war! Away with this vile abortion brought forth by human wickedness! Human-beings are slaughtering thousands of other human-beings whom they neither know, nor hate, nor love. Curse be those who, while not themselves obliged to face the horrors of war, bring it to pass! May they all be utterly destroyed, for they are brutes and beasts of prey!66

Peterson’s words reflected little sentiment for nationalism. He also reflected little appreciation for war in general, as he continued,

One’s eyes are opened to the importance of man and his achievements in the realm of culture. To war against war; to fight against it with every possible weapon: that will be the work which I shall undertake with the greatest eagerness if the Almighty grants me a safe and happy return! Here one becomes another man. My parents will receive me as a new-born child, mature, simpler. And in this respect these horrors are justified: they are the despicable offspring of the lowers abysses of hell, yet they provide a stern, thorough training for the human soul. Good God!—67

Peterson continued to describe his experience and vent his frustration with Germany’s war in a letter dated two days later:

There was an attack on Dixmuide [25 October]. Ghastly! A repetition of the first attack. Again frustrated by the awful machine-gun fire. The half-uttered ‘hurrah’ was choked. We all lay like logs on the ground and all about us death hissed and howled. Such a night is enough to make an old man of one. Strangely enough I kept perfectly calm. I can’t describe my frame of mind, but it was quite simple. My brain was clear and bright; only the thought of the Mother of Mercy predominated and on her I concentrated all my pain

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67 Ibid., 150.
and torment. Otherwise I was quite cool and calm; not resigned, but prepared for death. Oh, terrible moments! One dreads death and yet one could almost long for it through horror at this kind of death. One thinks: ‘I have been in two attacks, may I never see another!’ This is one’s most earnest desire, together with that of getting home safe and sound. What has become of all one’s courage? We have had enough of war. One is not necessarily a coward because one’s whole nature revolts against this barbarity, this gruesome slaughter. Away, away with this war! Put an end to it as speedily as possible!  

During the conflict, Peterson crept away from the line with several comrades because the French, as he suggested, were too close. He reached a safe spot with the machine-gun section and basically abandoned his regiment:

I don’t scruple to admit that from this standpoint I am glad not to be with my own troop and have to take part in this horrible dying. It is mean of me, but the cur in man is too strong. Put an end, O Lord, Thou Guide of the Universe, to this horror! Give us peace soon, very soon. Or rather grant us a joyous home-coming and time to put into practice the terrible lessons we have learnt here—for we have all been learning.

Fire brought disillusionment.

Alfred Buchalski, born in Bromberg, wrote about such a change to despondency in a 28 October letter before fighting at Dixmuide:

With what joy, with what enthusiasm I went into the war, which seemed to me a splendid opportunity for working off all the natural craving of youth for excitement and experience! In what bitter disappointment I now sit here, with horror in my heart! And in violent contrast to this, with what deep satisfaction I breathe in, with this precious air, that life of which hundreds have been deprived!

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68 Ibid., 151.

69 Ibid., 152.

70 Ibid.

What remained was frustration. There was also an ambiguity to his motives of fighting as he adjusted to conflict.

It was ghastly! Not the actual shedding of blood, nor that it was shed in vain, nor the fact that in the darkness our own comrades were firing at us—no, but he whole way in which a battle is fought is so revolting. To want to fight and not even to be able to defend oneself! The attack, which I thought was going to be so magnificent, meant nothing but being forced to get forward from one bit of cover to another in the face of a hail of bullets, and not to see the enemy who was firing them!

Certainly I hope to get used to this sort of warfare, and that I may yet get a chance of carrying out the order: ‘Forward, at the enemy!’ If one could only accomplish something, then, no doubt, the bullets wouldn’t hurt so much!72

Fritz Meese, a medical candidate in Berlin who was born at Koblenz, echoed the disenchantment of war.73 In a letter from November 1914, he wrote, “You simply can have no idea what it is like, to be in the trenches for days and weeks on end under enemy fire. Never again shall I be able to shout a thoughtless ‘hurrah’ in a café at the news of a victory—oh the poor patriots!”74 For Karl Josenhans, combat also caused a realization. Josenhans, who was born in Leonberg, shared this realization in letter from the front dated 9 November after reading letters on the dead persons of French and German soldiers: “Everything just like it is with us, and when one reads such things it quenches the last spark of hatred towards the French, even if one still felt one.”75 There would be no hatred left for Josenhans after 15 April 1915 because of his death near Ypres.76

72 Ibid.


74 Ibid.

75 Josenhans, 39.

76 Ibid.
The reality of war produced disillusionment. Lothar Dietz demonstrated this point. Born in Pegau, Dietz also went on to study philosophy, only he went to Leipzig. He wrote home about his experience under fire near Ypres in November:

You at home can’t have the faintest idea of what it means to us when in the newspaper it simply and blandly says: ‘In Flanders to-day again only artillery activity’. Far better go over the top in the most foolhardy attack, cost what it may, than stick it out all day long under shell-fire, wondering all the time whether the next one will maim one or blow one to bits. For the last three hours a corporal has been lying groaning on my right, here in the dug-out, with one arm and both legs shattered by a shell. The boyau runs down so steeply that it is impossible to carry him that way on a ground-sheet, and the other communication trench is under water. So ‘good advice is dear’. Anyone who is badly wounded generally dies while he is being got out of here. To-day has cost us four killed, two dangerously and three slightly wounded.

Only 60 yards away from us are the English, and they are very much on the alert as they would be only too glad to get back our hill. We have a fairly decent trench up here, because we drain all the water into the English trenches lower down….78

Franz Blumenfeld also noted a change in person, as demonstrated by his 15 October where he wrote:

…One thing weighs upon me more from day to day—the fear of getting brutalized…. I have no fear, none at all, of bullets and shells, but only of this great spiritual loneliness. I am afraid of losing my faith in human nature, in myself, in all that is good in the world! Oh, that is horrible!79

He also did not appreciate the attitude of his comrades at times, writing, “It is much harder for me to endure the incredibly coarse tone that prevails among the men here.”80

The idea of war causing a metamorphosis in man appeared again in Kurt Peterson’s letter from 29 October:


78 Ibid.

79 Blumenfeld, 20.

80 Ibid.
One thinks that one will never be able to learn to laugh again after one has been through such an experience! Melancholy, deep melancholy, takes possession of one. I know that nothing in my whole life can awake such a feeling of happiness as will be mine if I am again united, safe and sound, to my dear parents. What they were to me, and in how many ways I was wanting in my behaviour to them, is now so bitterly clear to me. My Parents, you shall have a changed son restored to you.\footnote{Peterson, “Kurt Peterson…,” 152-3.}

Unfortunately, he was never able to fulfill his promise. He died in Russian Poland on 3 August 1915.\footnote{Ibid., 149.} Freiburg in Baden born Rudolf Fischer also reiterated the change in a letter dated 18 November:

The whole life here at the front is permeated with a sublime solemnity. Death is a daily companion who hallows everything. One no longer receives him with pomp and lamentation. One treats His Majesty simply and plainly. He is like many people whom one loves even though one respects and fears them. Nobody will come through this war without being changed into a different person.

So be happy in Freiburg as we are at the front.\footnote{Rudolf Fischer, “Rudolf Fischer, Student of Philosophy, Heidelberg,” German Students’ War Letters, Philipp Witkop, ed., A. F. Wedd, ed. and translator, (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1929), 14-15, 15.}

Disenchantment seemed a common response to the German soldiers’ baptism. With disenchantment, nationalism dwindled.

Instead of dismay, something different developed in the mindset of Martin Drescher. While in contemplation, he demonstrated a view that went beyond disillusionment or devotion:

One talks about nothing but... the question of whether we shall be dead to-morrow or not. I have made up my mind to it pretty well. At first, of course, I trembled; the will to live is bound to be so strong; but the thought of immortality is a sublime compensation. And even though I do not hold the ordinary belief in personal immortality, yet last night I was cheered by the sight of the glittering stars and other remembrances and things I have noted in old days, especially out of Goethe, which have brought me back to the conception of a Universal Spirit into which the individual soul is absorbed. And I can now listen more calmly to the shells screaming overhead. I am firmly convinced that I,
that is my soul has not lived just this one life, and that it will live over and over again—how I don’t attempt to imagine, for that is useless. Thus I am calm and resigned.  

Of course, Martin Drescher was a philosophy student, and his psyche demonstrated his background. Sadly, his “Universal Spirit” accepted his soul shortly afterwards, when he died 3 November 1914 from wounds he suffered at Cherburg.  

Trial by fire did not change all sentiments of nationalism. Eduard Schmieder, who was born in Freiburg in Baden, pointed this out early on in the war while writing a letter dated 23 August after heavy artillery fire: “After each battle one thanks God that one still has life, one values it so much. But we would all sacrifice it gladly for our beautiful Fatherland.” Schmieder, who studied at Eberswalde, did not lose that philosophy, as noted in a 2 November letter from La Bassée:

I should like to take a peek into my dear homeland at the moment when they are celebrating a victory—my joy would compensate me for a few days in the trenches. I can imagine how lovely it is, when the sun struggles through the thick autumn mist, a blue tent stretches above our dear mountains, and the whole of Nature glows once more in colour and beauty before it dies. There is blissful joy in every victory won for the sake of the beautiful German country.

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84 Drescher, 9-10.

85 Ibid., 9.


87 Ibid.
Born and attending school in Munich, Rudolf Moldenhauer answered the call to arms for Germany. His admiration for the German people also appeared in a letter he wrote while on the front near Peronne on 9 December:

We watch our men in their field-grey uniforms; they come out of the dug-outs, stretch themselves, wash themselves and clean their rifles. They look out over the edge of the trench with shining eyes, and their bodies seem to be bursting with health and fitness. They are all young, full of joy in Nature, are living parts of that most wonderful whole—a nation developed into full beauty, goodness, and strength.

He died four days later. Werner Liebert, a law student at Leipzig who was born in Dresden, discovered that his brother died in battle. He referred to this tragedy in a letter on 4 December, stating how sad he was to hear about the death of his brother, who “…died a hero’s death for Germany’s victory.” Werner Liebert soon followed his brother, falling on 10 May 1915 near Givenchy. The attachment to the German nation did not cease for Karl Aldag either after combat, as he wrote, “I am proud because I know that through me our family has a share in the destiny of the Fatherland and is able to make a sacrifice for it.”

Other German soldiers not only intimated German romantic nationalism, they also alluded to one of its chief components: fear of the outside world. In an 18 October letter, Kaiserslautern born Arthur Meess, a former engineering student at Charlottenburg, demonstrated this while trying to console the friends and family members of a fallen friend:

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89 Ibid.


91 Aldag, 31.
But as for mourning for him—good heavens, yes, my heart aches, of course, but at this time, when our dear Fatherland is in danger greater even than that of a hundred years ago, is not every drop of blood that is shed hallowed, and has not Walter died the most splendid, the most glorious death that one can imagine? Good Lord, how I envy him, how proud I feel of him, how I long-forgive me—to shed my blood too for the dearly loved Fatherland, for Kaiser and King! To him that joy has been granted; his last thought was of us; and we will bear him in our hearts as our hero and our pride!

But to you I cry: ‘Lift up your heads; look around you; all that we hold most sacred is at stake, and our best is not too good to sacrifice in such a cause; therefore show pride in your faces in spite of the sorrow in your hearts!’ For one thing only we must hope, as I said to Walter at parting: ‘Nothing else matters—only victory!’

Meess’s family and friends required the same consoling after he was killed near Nieuport on 24 July 1915. Rudolf Fischer, while in Heidelberg, studied philosophy when the call to arms occurred. On 18 November from Bauvin, Fischer put his thoughts to a letter after experiencing the war at the front.

Spiritually I am pretty well all right again and proud to be allowed to help and to fight for parents, brothers and sisters, for the dear Fatherland and for all that has stood highest in my estimation—for we are fighting for poetry, for art, for philosophy and culture. It is tragic but magnificent.

Tragically indeed, Fischer would not be able to study philosophy in the future. He met his end near Vermelles on 1 December 1914. Fischer was not the only believer in the German nation.

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93 Ibid., 147.

94 Fischer, 14.

95 Ibid., 14-15.

96 Ibid., 14.
Herbert Sulzbach also showed his attachment to the German cause while writing on 21 October: “We certainly did not want this war! We are only defending ourselves and our Germany against a world of enemies who have banded together against us.”

Still, in 1914, blind acceptance of German nationalism was not present with certain members of the German army. They viewed German nationalism as incomplete—the Übermensch had not yet been realized. In a letter dated 30 November, Emil Alefeld suggested this even before he disembarked from Strasburg to the front:

And if I knew for certain that I should not come back, I should go all the same; not with that enthusiasm which I felt at Mülhausen, when I believed that our nation had been suddenly ennobled by the war; my present enthusiasm is different: I will fight and perhaps also die for my belief in a finer, greater, worthier Germany, from which all wickedness and self-seeking are banished and where faith and honour have been reinstated in their old places. We are far, very far, from that. We are still a nation of weak, self-seeking people, not of real ‘men’. Yes, no doubt I have become more in earnest because I see that so many people have not.

Alefeld still demonstrated his willingness to die for the German nation, but not necessarily for the German nation of 1914. It was for the potential. Tragically, he would not live to see that potential as he died in Flanders on 20 December 1914.

Paul Rohweder, who was born at Zarpen, in Holstein, was a student of theology at Kiel, when the war broke out. His view of the German nation was of particular interest, considering

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97 Sulzbach, 37.

98 Alefeld, 23-4.

99 Ibid., 23.

that Holstein was not part of any German state before the Danish War of 1864. For Rohweder, the German race and German nationalism was of paramount importance, as he wrote from the front after seeing action on 29 October:

> If only our warfare achieves the right kind of success; if it brings blessing upon the Fatherland and eventually on the whole of mankind; if we were sure of that, we should bear our sufferings and privations gladly. How I thank God that I am naturally endowed with such powers of endurance! I never felt so strong as I do not.

Unfortunately, Rohweder’s endurance came to an end near Het Sas on 23 April 1915. Regardless of devotion or disillusionment, a common theme existed amidst the German army: camaraderie. For Benno Zeigler, a former student of Medicine in Freiburg in Baden, trial by fire produced little nationalist sentiment. Camaraderie played a larger role. He relayed his experience at the front in a letter dated 14 September, where,

> …truly the war-horror seems to have reached its climax. O God! how many have those hours been when on every side gruesome Death was reaping his terrible harvest. One sees someone fall—forward on his face—one can’t immediately recognize who it is—one turns the blood-covered face up—O God! it’s you! Why had it to be just you! And how often that happened!

Zeigler admitted that he considered himself a “weakling,” but he felt that his father’s blessing to fight helped him be strong and get through the carnage somehow. Perhaps it did, as Zeigler,

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101 Prussia and Austria fought Denmark over Schleswig-Holstein and won both territories. Holstein went to Austria until Prussia took it after defeating the Austrian Empire in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866.

102 Rohweder, 67-8.

103 Ibid., 67.


105 Ibid.
who was born in Ueberlingen, described an event involving Lance-Corporal Landeck.  

Landeck was “a good comrade” who led one-half of a platoon into battle:

‘The second half-platoon will follow me.  Forward!’ he cried.  ‘Always forward!’ And at that very moment a shell-splinter carried away the lower part of his thigh.  He lay there, on one side for four hours, lay and nearly bled to death.  At last somebody happened to notice him lying there.  The battle was still going on.  The enemy’s rifle-bullets were still whizzing from the edge of the wood.  Nobody wanted to leave a position of safety to fetch him in.  I dared to do it.  The man who had found him went too, and we carried him on his coat into safety….  Poor chap!  he will probably have to have his leg amputated at the knee.  Such isolated instance make more impression upon one that a fight against a whole French Army Corps.  

Zeigler, concerned for his comrade, found the courage he desired.  Sadly, his courage could not save him from his fate.  He met his end on 8 October 1914, near Annay.

The attachment to fellow combatants existed for Franz Blumenfeld.  In a letter dated 5 November, he noted how he liked fraternizing with the Mecklenburg Jaegers, writing, “what fine, wonderful chaps they are!  Always quietly cheery, helpful, brisk, and extraordinarily friendly both with one another and with everybody else.”  Berlin born Kurt Schlenner studied law and political economy in Berlin when the war began.  He also noted the presence of comradeship in a letter dated 9 December:  “The finest thing of all is the marvelous comradeship at the Front, fresh instances of which are always gladdening one’s heart.  First of all there is the universal comradeship which runs through the whole German army and is shown by our all

106 Ibid., 5-6.

107 Ibid., 6.

108 Blumenfeld, 21.

calling each other ‘Du’.”  Schlenner wrote how soldiers always called each other “Comrade” even if they did not know each other, and, very importantly, soldiers would buy beer for each other. For this former student of Berlin, camaraderie was the measuring stick of a man:

“Even more important… is the personal comradeship between man and man among those who are constantly dependent on one another. No test enables one to divide people up into good and bad so easily as that of comradeship…. He continues, writing, “The test of comradeship enables one also to look into the very depths of each one’s soul, and then one sees how much, in civil life, was only outward show.”

The influence of camaraderie was also present for the philosophy student, Lothar Dietz, as he wrote, in a 13 November letter while recovering from a wound, how, “…tears are running down my face because I have to sit here doing nothing while my comrades out there are fighting so gallantly. I should be in absolute despair if I were not sure of being back in the line in a few weeks’ time.” He was able to return to the front where he later died on 15 April 1915 near Ypres. Devotion to comrades played a role with Willi Böhne, a former student of Chemistry at Freiburg in Breisgau. Born in Elberfeld, Böhne went forth to battle, but as he noted in a

110 Ibid.
111 Ibid., 27.
112 Ibid.
113 Ibid.
114 Dietz, 63.
115 Ibid., 61.
letter dated 20 October, the fighting was not what he imagined: “We are simply nothing but moles…. One has to do all sorts of things like that [burrowing trenches], things one had no idea of before, but one doesn’t mind.”117 Sadly, Böhne, who was near Lille, could not finish writing the letter, though the letter continued:

I take the liberty of completing this letter begun by your dear son and brother, who is unable to finish it himself, being wounded. In order to break the news to you I respectfully inform you of this. Be prepared for the worst. The bullet which struck this hero was aimed only too well, for it killed him. Comfort yourselves with the knowledge that he died the finest of all deaths—a hero’s death for the Fatherland.

With friendly greetings,
A Comrade, who means this kindly.118

Böhne’s comrade exhibited camaraderie.

The ordeal of combat affected the German troopers, and so did the influence of camaraderie. Fritz Meese wrote,

Boys, you don’t realize how well off we were in Berlin! Truly and honestly, if I ever felt inclined to moralize about my past life, every such thought has vanished now. I am quite convinced that everybody who gets home safe and sound will be a totally different fellow in every way. He will certainly be more considerate towards other people, especially in the matter of exploiting them for his own ends. The habit of comradeship necessitated by the war will have that result.

Live here isn’t worth a damn, one thinks nothing of losing it.119

Camaraderie produced heroism. The attachment to his comrades caused Kurt Peterson to risk his life to collect a wounded German soldier in the open:

The last three wounded form the first attack were still lying out in the open. Only one more could be fetched in. The enemy has no consideration for efforts at succor. He redoubles his fire. On the second trip the bearers deserted me. Two wounded were still lying there. ‘I can only take one. Who will wait?’ ‘Take him,’ said the younger of the two, as if it were a matter of course, pointing to his older and badly wounded comrade, a

117 Ibid.

118 Ibid., 8.

119 Meese, 119-20.
Landsturm man and the father of a family. ‘But you won’t leave me in the lurch, will you, Comrade?’ Impulsively I held out my hand to him. That was a promise. I had sworn to myself that nothing should force me under fire for a third time, but the magnanimity of this wounded man was sufficient to upset this resolution. Thank God I have not become a scoundrel and a breaker of my word. The Lieutenant would not let me go. In the evening he gave in. He went through the whole Company till at last he found volunteers. The wounded man was carried in on a ground-sheet. ‘I have been looking forward all day to your coming back!’ That was how he greeted us. If one could only do as much for everybody!120

Peterson, who earlier abandoned his regiment, redeemed himself. Camaraderie aided his redemption.

What was important to note was how romantic nationalist ideas manifested themselves into camaraderie. The German nationalism demonstrated a propensity for exclusion. The law and political economy student from Berlin—the cradle of German nationalism, Kurt Schlenner, alluded to this when he discussed camaraderie. The fact that comrades helped each other in various ways served importance:

These are little things, but they show a comradeship which warms one’s heart. It makes so many things easier. I think that this alone must give us a great pull over the motley crew of enemies facing us. Over there every man must first have a look to see whether the comrade appearing before him is of his own race or not-one could not very well respect a nigger as a comrade.121

The ethnic make-up was of vital importance. To be a comrade in the German army, one needed to be German, according to Schlenner. The motley crew of British and French soldiers meant no camaraderie could exist. This was the influence of German romantic nationalism. Homogeneity trumped diversity.

120 Peterson, 153. Editor’s note—“Landsturm was the 3rd Reserve, composed of elderly and ‘C3’ men.”

121 Schlenner, 27.
One excellent case of the conflict between ethnicity and German nationalism involved Herbert Sulzbach. Herbert Sulzbach was born in Frankfurt-on Main, and his grandfather, Rudolf, played an important role in the rise of Germany, at least in the rise of the German economy. Rudolf was the founder of the Bankhaus Gebrüder Sulzbach in 1855, and he was also one of the founders of Deutsche Bank. From this “German” family, Herbert grew up and volunteered for service at the outbreak of the war. He enlisted with the 63\textsuperscript{rd} (Frankfurt) Field Artillery Regiment, and he was on his way to western front by early September 1914. During the course of the war, Herbert Sulzbach won the Iron Cross, 2\textsuperscript{nd} Class, for his role in Battle of Somme (1916) and won the Iron Cross, 1\textsuperscript{st} Class, after Battle of Villers-Cotterets (1918). He even received the Front-line Cross of Merit (‘Frontkämper Ehrenkreuz’) from Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg himself. Herbert Sulzbach appeared to be a symbol, or hero, for Germany. That, however, was not necessarily the case, at least to anti-Semitic Germans after World War I. For those Germans, including Nazis, Herbert Sulzbach was not a German at all. Their reason—he was of Jewish descent. Due to Nazi persecution, Herbert Sulzbach eventually fled Germany with his wife, Beate, to the United Kingdom, where he served in the

\begin{footnotes}

\footnote{Sulzbach, 10.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
\footnote{Ibid.}
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\footnote{Ibid.}
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British Army in World War II against Nazi Germany. The paradoxes and conflicts involving Herbert Sulzbach were quite extraordinary. In his mind, he belonged to the German nation, but part of nationalism involved the other members of the nation recognizing the original’s belonging as well. The ethnic difference was too much for a anti-Semitic Germans to overcome. They viewed the Jewish people as “the other” who did not belong to Germany. Fear of foreigners threatening the unity of the German nation was not excluded to the outside of the German border. The fear also included “domestic threats,” and for anti-Semitic Germans, these threats were the Jews.

Another aspect of Herbert Sulzbach’s service involved how strongly he felt toward the German nation. The sense of belonging to the German nation was present, as demonstrated by his thoughts of the armistice in 1918.

In spite of it all, we can be proud of the performance we put up, and we shall always be proud of it. Never before has a nation, a single army, had the whole world against it and stood its ground against such overwhelming odds; had it been the other way round, this heroic performance could never have been achieved by any other nation. We protected our homeland from her enemies—they never pushed us far as German territory.129

He truly felt part of the German nation. “On 8 December I went for a walk in my beloved uniform for the last time to report my discharge to the local military office, the Bezirkskommando. I felt as though I were walking to my own funeral.”130 The sad reality was

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128 Ibid., 9-12. An interesting fact involving Beate involved her relationship to Otto von Klemperer. She was his niece.

129 Ibid., 250.

130 Ibid., 256.
anti-Semitic followers of the romantic nationalism that evolved in German society did not see it the same way. Romantic nationalism allowed this to occur.

Thus, with both camaraderie and romantic nationalism, limitations existed. Enthusiasm and romantic nationalism existed in the mindset of the German soldiers as they marched to the front. The soldiers’ attachment to German nationalism suffered in the fiery baptismal waters, which produced both disillusionment as well as continued devotion. The ordeal of fire brought forth the true psyche of the troopers, and tender feelings of camaraderie manifested themselves in both the mindset and actions of the troopers. Limitations in both romantic nationalism and camaraderie, however, remained.

The Edge of Soldiery

The German soldier engaged in some rather questionable tactics as well as carried out horrific actions during the war. Some of these tactics would arguably fall below the soldiery horizon. Why did the German soldiers perform these actions? Again, the link between soldiery and nationalism presented itself.

For the German soldiers, a little trickery was never a bad thing. Their Machiavellian belief in war allowed them to justify their actions. For their enemy, however, their actions were despicable. The German soldiers used unconventional methods of warfare to gain an edge, and this disturbed the British. One British regular noted, “A voice had called out in English, ‘has anybody got a map?’ and when our C .O. stood up with his map, a German walked up, and shot him with a revolver. The German was killed by a bayonet stab from a private.”¹³¹ According to Major-General Sir Cecil Lowther, “the enemy are adopting Boer methods and using our uniform

¹³¹ Ascoli, 3.
to get up to our lines.”\textsuperscript{132} The Germans also dressed up in British uniforms or tried bribery.\textsuperscript{133} It seemed apparent to the British that the Germans used a scorched earth policy while they advanced: “The Germans are burning everything.”\textsuperscript{134} They even spoke French in order to infiltrate the British lines: “On another occasion they dressed in French uniforms and came up shouting “Vive l’Angleterre” and actually started talking French to our people and then when they were all up they suddenly opened fire.”\textsuperscript{135} At Landrecies on 27 August, the German soldiers continued this practice, as Major J. L. Mowbray of the British Army recorded, “The Enemy adopt strange methods. They approached LANDRECIES in a body some dressed in French uniform and some in plain clothes, calling out “Vive! ‘Angleterre” and singing the Marseillaise.”\textsuperscript{136}

British regular, B. C. Myatt observed questionable soldiery practices executed by the German army on 22 September:

An ambulance No 7 came along a road full of wounded, and a cavalry regiment was passing as well, and the Germans shelled them terrible. Killed 14 fellows of the Ambulance and blew it to pieces. Its [sic] a rotten shame, they are wicked swines. Never mind, they will answer for it before long. The Germans are not burying their dead and fire on our troops if they try to dig graves. The stench is getting hot from the bodies.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{132} Sir Cecil Lowther, 97/10/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 14.

\textsuperscript{133} There were actual statements in the personal accounts of British soldiers revealing how Germans would come up to artillery men and bribe them for their guns.

\textsuperscript{134} H. Bellew, 91/23/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{135} Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{136} Major J. L. Mowbray, 82/10/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 9.

\textsuperscript{137} B. C. Myatt, 97/4/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
Another British regular supported this statement, writing, “It is true that the Germans did fire on the Hospitals at Mons, and Cambrai, and at all the places that were fixed up for the wounded.”

Wounded and white flags sometimes did not matter to certain German soldiers, as depicted by one British regular, G. A. Loyd, telling the story of his comrade, Compton Thornhill:

The story of Thornhill was most distressing. He and the remainder of L.F. Company including Inigo Jones, pushed on ahead and were unable to return when the enemy counter-attacked. There was a pit into which Thornhill and several other wounded men, including another officer of another regiment, managed to crawl for shelter. When the Germans approached, Thornhill and the other officer held up white handkerchiefs as a sign that they were non-combatant, but the German infantry shot dead every one of them with the exception of one only who, pretending to be dead, eventually escaped and told the story of so sad a deed.”

J. W. Palmer, who kept a diary during the war, also noted the harshness of the German soldier.

“A French soldier has just been brought in, a victim of German cruelty and hatred. His eyes have been gouged out, his ears cut off and he died a few minutes after we saw him. He gave the Doctor to understand that it was on account of his refusal to give away information.”

The Germans also made use of the white flag in order to give their enemy a false sense of security. One anonymous British regular recalled such an event, writing,

On the 20th of Sept I shall never forget it on Sunday the germans [sic] broke through the Worcesters in a dense wood up above. The order came for us to reinforce the front line we fell in and fixed our bayonets and marched off in the direction of the germans [sic] on our arrival we extended to 3 paces then the order to swing our left round and advance in this order with a big hill to face we started to advance the bullets and heavy shrapnel began to fall thick and heavy but we could not see the enemy till one fellow shouted I can see their helmets. A young officer who came over here shouted to bayonet charge them, it was useless as their [sic] was a thick edge between us and the germans [sic] the poor chap gave a shreak [sic] it was evident he had received a bullet which proved fatal. Some of them put their hands up to surrender but when our fellows went to fetch them in as

138 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
139 Lt. G. A. Loyd, 98/2/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32.
they thought they shot them down like dogs. The man on my left gave yell he was hit in the forearm which had smashed the bone and the bullet came out of his muscle…. When we reached the top I started to count the dead on both sides but I soon got tired as both of us lost heavy. I saw one german [sic] in a kneeling position and I thought he was foxing so I covered him with my rifle and pushed him over but he was stiff…. we could hear the groans of the wounded germans [sic] who had been hit by our shrapnel on their retirement through the wood.141

The treatment of civilians, prisoners of war, and possessions was a subject of much debate amongst historians. For some Germans, they behaved in a civilized manner toward these groups of people. Otto Hah, a deputy officer, described an encounter with a civilian in August:

Coming to a house, we thought we would spend the night there. The peasant woman was quite beside herself, but I managed to ally her fears by telling her that we were not going to do her any harm and that we were not so wicked as she might think. All we wanted was some hay to sleep on. We had our own rations with us, so we should not deprive her of anything. The next morning she even offered me a glass with an old toothbrush in it. I thanked her warmly and we parted good friends.142

On 3 September, while marching to the front, Herbert Sulzbach encountered some POWs and treated them well: “Frenchmen and Englishmen. Poor chaps, all dirty and untidy. I gave them as much to eat as I could find.”143 He continued, noticing “the first ruined villages and country mansions” of Belgium, and at Namur, he saw “the first signs of artillery fire: houses in ruins and sad-faced inhabitants.”144 Nevertheless, he understood the reality of war when he came across a Belgian prisoner: “At my barracks is a Belgian prisoner, who attacked a German officer and knocked him about and is now going to be shot tomorrow. I talk to him and feel overwhelmed


143 Sulzbach, 27.

144 Ibid. The fact that he noticed these events suggested that they made an impression on him. He was not callous toward the loss of material possessions.
by this event—having a man in front of you who is going to be executed next day. Sulzbach also noted his comrades showing compassion to the civilians: “On many doors in the town you see the proof of our troops’ good nature. You are always finding messages chalked up saying ‘Be nice, chaps, and look after the people in this house’, followed by the name of the Unit.”

This continued, as he wrote, “We keep noting inscriptions on the doors of houses and cottages, even in the villages, ‘Very nice people, please treat them kindly. Sergeant X’, sometimes written in English and French as well.”

This compassion did not stop as the war progressed, at least, not for Freidrich Sohnrey. Sohnrey, who was born in Möllenden and studied political economy in Berlin, illustrated this point while he was on the front near Clamecy in late October:

I go every day into the village here to see a family with six children. The father is in the war. The woman says that he is a Reserve Dragoon. She innocently believes that he has not yet been under fire, but she has had no news for two months. She sheds tears when she tells me that and hears that we get letters from home every day. I get hot water there so as to have a good wash after four days’ interval, but I can’t stop too long, as suspicious scratchings on the part of the children indicate undesirable house-mates.

One does feel sorry for these poor people, who have hardly a stitch of underclothing to change into, not to speak of anything to eat—nothing left but potatoes, and the woman is always tearfully asking me how much longer she and her children will have to go on living like that. She is always lamenting over the war: ‘C’est triste pour nous et pour vous.’ She lays the blame for it on the English and curses them. It makes her very unhappy when I tell her that we are making preparations for the winter and shall probably spend Christmas in the village. She just sobs helplessly. By way of thanks I leave her some bread and army biscuit, which the children fall upon with shouts of delight. The youngest is five months old. It is true that one cow has been left in the village, by order of the Area-Commandant, to supply milk for the babies, but even so that is little enough. On the second day I gave each of the children two sous. The woman was very much pleased and touched by my sympathy. She followed me to the door and assured me that her house was always ‘à votre disposition’.

145 Ibid., 28.
146 Ibid.
147 Ibid.
We all pity these poor people, who are clinging to the last remnants of their former happy existence, though in constant danger of seeing all their possessions burnt and smashed up by their own artillery, and I hardly think that a single one of our soldiers would treat them with anything but friendliness. Many of the men habitually give them some of their bread. The inhabitants of the place gather round our field-kitchens regularly to collect their tribute. So we are seeing to it that our enemies’ belongings do not starve. Kindliness is probably that part of the German character from which it derives its greatness. ‘It is the German soul, that makes a sick world whole’—and no doubt that means the German heart.  

On 1 December, Herbert Sulzbach noted his sorrow for the civilians: “We gorge ourselves…, but at the same time we can’t avoid seeing how wretched and impoverished many French civilians look and how grieved they must be feeling.” Indeed, there were a select group of German soldiers who showed compassion to civilians and prisoners of war.

However, the evidence of German “atrocities” was rather damning. One aspect of professionalism for soldiery involved interaction with civilians. Troopers who demonstrated professionalism in war avoided brutality toward noncombatants. Soldiers who engaged in savagery toward civilians operated “below the military horizon” and acted more like warriors or fighters as opposed to soldiers.


149 Sulzbach, 41.


151 John Keegan alluded to this type of behavior falling “below the military horizon” in A History of Warfare, 121.
of inhumanity toward civilian populations. This mentality was widespread amongst the German soldiers. The accounts and reports from eye-witnesses, including German soldiers themselves, depicted an army out to conquer. The memoirs depicted a nation out to conquer. The German artist, Peter von Cornelius, predicted it in his painting, The Four Horses of the Apocalypse (1845). The horses of the apocalypse arrived, and they were ridden by German soldiers.

In defense of the German army, they perceived a threat of *francs-tireurs* (free-shooters). The term came from Franco-Prussian War of 1870-71 when volunteer detachments harassed the German armies who entered France. At the Belgian town of Herve, German soldiers said that villagers fired upon them, and after disarming the villagers, “six guilty Belgian peasants were shot by order of an officer.” German soldiers also noted that “girls of eight or ten years of age, armed with sharp instruments, were busying themselves with the German wounded,”—they found out that girls had cut off the earlobes of German soldiers.

One German soldier recorded the threat of *francs-tireurs* in his war diary on 19 August:

> Our cavalry patrols, we hear, are being shot at in the villages again and again. Several poor fellows have already lost their lives. Disgraceful! An honest bullet in honest battle—yes, then one has shed one’s blood for the Fatherland. But to be shot from

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152 Horne and Kramer, 1. Horne and Kramer wrote a damning account of the German actions toward the civilian population. They rely heavily on Belgian and French archives and reports when discussing the atrocities.

153 Ibid.


155 Ibid.
ambush, from the window of a house, the gun-barrel hidden behind flower-pots, no, that is not a nice soldierly death.156

Another German soldier noted the threat at Liege:

Now’s the good part. We were just about to rest when we were suddenly fired on from each house […] Each male inhabitant of the village was arrested. Then our artillery was brought into action and shot the whole place into flames. I can tell you, [it’s not easy] when you go through something like this—to go through the burning village and simply shoot down everyone. But the people have only themselves to blame, for during the day they were hospitable and in the night they shot at us.157

Fritz Nagel, a reserve in field artillery, described the anxiety as well.

Warfare in Belgium soon became a hideous experience because the population took part in the fight. Whenever they had the chance they shot down German soldiers…There was little defence against that sort of warfare because the streets were full of civilians and so were the houses. Unless they shot first, nobody knew where the enemy was. It was nerve-wracking in the extreme and resulted in savage and merciless slaughter at the slightest provocation. As we marched towards Lousvain, most houses of the villages were burning and dead soldiers and civilians lay everywhere…Frightened civilians lined the streets, hands held high as a sign to surrender. Bedsheets hung out of windows for the same purpose. To see those frightened men, women and children was a really terrible sight. By now the German soldier was frightened, too, expecting to be shot at from all sides. I don’t know whether these Belgians were ordered to resist or whether it was spontaneous, but it surely served no useful purpose. They could not kill enough Germans to influence events, though it was easy for them to shoot a German and then disappear in a crowd. The marching troops, the crackling of burning houses and the shouted orders make it impossible to hear even the crack of a single shot….158

Herbert Sulzbach noted the perceived threat while marching to Tournai on 1 October:


157 John Horne and Alan Kramer, 97. They rely heavily on the following material: Parole. Deutsche Krieger-Zeitung: Amtliche Zeitung de Deutschen Kriegerbundes, 23 August 1914, in Bundesarchiv (BA), Potsdam, Reichskanzlei 2401/2 (the report was taken from the Magdeburger Zeitung).

On the march through Leuze we see many inhabitants with frightened faces. The houses have all their window-curtains drawn. The unit which last marched through Leuze seems to have been fired on by the civilian inhabitants, so we all ride through this ‘pleasant’ village revolver in hand.159

The civilians were not very friendly, indeed, as Sulzbach experienced at Tournai: “Our section is the advance party again. Tournai has been evacuated by the enemy; we march through the town and get stared at by the inhabitants as though we were seamonsters—not very amiably.”160

The perceived threat was still present on 8 November for Sulzbach: “We have to keep going out to hunt francs-tireurs, civilians behind the front who take every opportunity of shooting at us out of hiding-places.”161 Corporal Stefan Westmann discussed his experience going through Belgium

During our advance through Belgium we marched on and on. We never dared take off our boots, because our feet were so swollen that we didn’t think it would be possible to put them on again. In one small village the mayor came and asked our company commanders not to allow us to cut off the hands of children. These were atrocity stories which he had heard about the German Army. At first we laughed about it, but when we heard of other propaganda things against the German Army, we became angry.162

Allied propaganda did not sympathize with the German soldiers’ fear of the francs-tireurs.

British war correspondents in Belgium have seen little murdered children with roasted feet. The tiny mites were hung over a fire before they were slain. This was done by German troops—men with children of their own at home, or with little brothers and sisters of the same age as the innocents they torture before killing.

At Tirlemont the Special Correspondent to The Times met a peasant woman who told him that her babes had been trampled to death under the hoofs of the horses of the Uhlans. As the Englishman was considering that he only had the woman’s word for this atrocity, he saw a little girl come staggering along the road, as if she were blind. He

159 Sulzbach, 30.

160 Ibid., 31.

161 Ibid., 39.

162 Arthur, 25.
found that her eye and cheek were laid open. This had been done, not by a chance bullet, but by a deliberate thrust of an Uhlan’s lance, who charged upon the innocent child in sheer devilish sport.  

Even so, the accounts were damning. German soldiers committed atrocious acts under the “fog of war.” As historian Larry Zuckerman noted, “The real rape had nothing to do with atrocities, authentic or imagined, but with routine terror and the mind-set that condoned it, which put German crimes on another level.” The situation reached the point that, “Occupied Belgium was a forerunner of Nazi Europe.” Even from the German government, deception and lies set the tone for Germany’s involvement in Belgium. This went all the way up to the Chancellor of Germany himself, Theobald von Bethman Hollweg, when he told the Reichstag of Germany, “The wrong—I speak openly—the wrong we are thereby committing we will try to make good as soon as our military aims have been attained.”

The rumors of German atrocities began as early as 4 August when a rich American expatriate mentioned innuendos about German “barbarians” killing women and children on sight in eastern Belgium as early as 4 August. The gossip reached Brussels, as one local girl


164 Zuckerman, 1.

165 Ibid., 2.

166 Ibid., 11-20.


recalled: “We had heard in Brussels what was happening at the frontier—the killing, the shooting, the atrocities and of course it was awful…” By 18 August, the Germans soldiers were coming, but,

They were preceded by streams of refugees, telling us more stories of atrocities in the villages and small towns of the Ardennes. We heard about friends from a little village—the young woman who was shot dead in front of her child just after her husband had been taken away to be shot. That happened hundreds and thousands of times, always the same story.170

In the Belgian town of Visé, Belgian troops blew up a bridge and started shooting from opposite side of river, which, according to Belgian witnesses, angered the German soldiers.171 They, in turn, accused the townspeople of having participated, shouting, “Man hat geschossen!” (Someone has shot!).172 The Germans proceeded to burn houses, and they shot or bayoneted a dozen people, killing seven.173 By 8 August, twenty-one “incidents” amounting to eight hundred and fifty deaths occurred while thirteen hundred buildings were deliberately destroyed by the German soldiers.174 On 15 August, the Germans blamed the locals for shooting at them again and set fire to the village, but,

The Belgians claimed that Visé burned because drunken soldiers had fired and begun shooting one another before they recognized their error. Whey they did, they shouted, “Man has geschossen!” and turned their weapons on the populace, killing sixteen


170 Ibid.

171 Zuckerman, 22. He relies heavily on Belgium, Rapports et documents d’enquête, Volume 1, Rapports sure les attentats commis par les troupes allemandes pendant l’invasion et l’occupation de la Belgique, Tome 1, (Brussels, 1922, Tome 2, Brussels, 1923).

172 Ibid.

173 Ibid.

174 Horne and Kramer, 13 and 77.
civilians. For two days, the Belgians said, the soldiers pillaged Visé street by street, loading the loot onto trucks bound for Germany, and set fires, which they helped along with naphtha pumps and disks made of incendiary material. Afterward, they rounded up 631 “suspected francs-tireurs,” including women and children, and sent them to Germany as prisoners of war.\footnote{Zuckerman, 27. He relies heavily on Belgium, 18.}

The village of Aerschot saw one hundred fifty-six civilians shot by German soldiers.\footnote{Ibid., 29.}
The villages of Andene and Seilles saw two hundred sixty-two civilians executed with two hundred buildings burnt down.\footnote{Ibid.}

Three hundred eighty four deaths with two hundred forty buildings burnt down occurred at Tamines.\footnote{Ibid., 29-30.}
The town of Dinant saw six hundred seventy four deaths, an in-determinant amount of deportations, and eleven hundred buildings burnt down.\footnote{Ibid., 30.}

Atrocities continued.\footnote{Ibid., 30-7.} By 8 August in all of Belgium, eight hundred and fifty civilians were executed by the German army, and thirteen thousand buildings were deliberately burned down.\footnote{Horne and Kramer, 13.}
The war had only just begun, and so had the atrocities. Estimates suggested a total of 6,427 total civilian death for Belgium and France, nine hundred and six can be reasonably assumed to be French.\footnote{Ibid., 74.} The amount of civilian death provided a damning account of the brutality of the German army.
When entering the village of Battice, a reserve in Brandenburg regiment named Walter Bloem found the village “completely gutted” and saw “roasted remnants of iron bedsteads and furnishings.” Bloem continued through another village, where he found that it… “was like marching through Hell,” partly due to seeing two peasants dead by a wall—he was told they were civilian snipers.

But how huge was the threat of the francs-tireurs? At the town of Huy on 24 August, one Major von Bassewitz (of 2\textsuperscript{nd} Army) issued this order to his troops:

Last night shots were fired. It has not been proved that the citizens of the town still have weapons in their possession. Nor has it been proved that the population took part in the firing. On the contrary, the impression is unavoidable that German soldiers, under the influence of alcohol, in quite incomprehensible fear of enemy attack, opened fire. The conduct of the soldiers last night, with few exceptions, had made a completely shameful impression. It is most regrettable when officers or NCOs set fire to houses and incite the men to burn and pillage by their conduct without permission or order of the most superior officer…No shooting in the town is to be allowed without officers’ orders. The wretched attitude of the men has resulted in one NCO and one soldier being injured by German bullets.

Otto Han, a deputy officer in the German army also questioned the threat:

Time and time again, particularly in the first half of August, the men’s nervousness manifested itself in alarms about Belgian snipers. The sight of a windmill was enough to start a rumour that the Belgians were transmitting messages by code by means of the position of the sails. Catholic priests were favourite suspects as transmitters of such secret messages. During our entirely peaceful advance behind the front line I once saw a non-commissioned officer of my platoon training his rifle on a man running at some distance. I asked him why he was doing that, and his answer was: ‘It’s one of those

\begin{itemize}
  \item[184] Ibid., 30.
  \item[185] Horne and Kramer, 121. They rely heavily on the following sources: CPHDC, Moscow, 1415-1-54, fol. 270 and 273, circular found in home of Antwerp schoolteacher van Ruy, in Malines. They noted that an almost identical copy existed in Carl Ernst, \textit{Der Große Krieg in Belgien: Beobachtungen, seinen ehemaligen hannoverschen Landsleuten gewidment.} (Gembloux: Duculot, 1930), 33-4.
\end{itemize}
Belgian snipers, he’s thrown away his uniform and is trying to get away.’ As evidence he showed me a tunic lying in a wet ditch where it had undoubtedly been for days.\footnote{Macdonald, 1914-1918: Voices & Images of the Great War, 38.}

Another incident of atrocity was admitted by a German soldier named Rudolph Grimmer:

> We were given the order to kill all civilians shooting at us, but in reality the men of my regiment and I myself fired at all civilians we found in the houses from which we suspected there had been shots fired; in that way we killed women and even children. We did not do it light heartedly, but we had received orders from our superior officers to act in this way, and not one single soldier in the active army would know to disobey an order from the senior command. My company did not kill more than about 50 civilians in the conditions I have just described.\footnote{Horne and Kramer, 163-4. They rely heavily on sources from AGR, Brussels, CE III 374 B1, 21, Loustalot inquiry.} \footnote{Ibid., 164.} \footnote{Ibid.}

The guilt of the German army seemed apparent. “Many soldiers stated… that an order was given simply to massacre villains, not only those caught resisting or suspected of being franc-tireurs. One man accurately identified it as an army corps order, and another said that it was given to all the companies in his regiment.”\footnote{Ibid.} In fact, the guilt went to all the way to the top: “A soldier in IR 100 stated it was part of the pre-war preparations of the army to ‘treat civilians without pity.’”\footnote{Hamburger Volkszeitung, 25 August 1927, as cited in John Horne and Alan Kramer, German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 172-3.}

One tragic story came with the confession of Paul Reime, a German soldier who witnessed the massacre at Les Rivages, in Dinant, in 1914.\footnote{Hamburger Volkszeitung, 25 August 1927, as cited in John Horne and Alan Kramer, German Atrocities, 1914: A History of Denial, (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2001), 172-3.} Reime wrote this confession
thirteen years after the event. His regiment came across a group of civilians hiding by the bank of a river, where they were trapped by the German army.\footnote{Ibid., as cited in Horne and Kramer, 172.}

Trembling they submit to their fate and apparently expect to be killed by our bayonets. But we make an effort to reassure them. Captain d' Elsa, whom we call, assures them in French that they have nothing to fear. Piteable to see how the torment they have suffered turns into a kind of paroxysm, as the people (women, children, old people) throw themselves at our feet and try to kiss our hands, weeping and laughing […] What follows proceeds with the speed and inexorability of a catastrophe:

The people have been brought back up to the road. At the sight of the companies which have halted there they are seized with fear. They are searched, without anything suspicious being found; they are to be taken behind the line, but—the poor souls!—it does not come to that. A machine-gun firing from the opposite bank causes the most appalling confusion. The sound of the shots echoes a hundredfold as they strike the rock wall. Whoever has not heard the initial ‘tactac’ from over there believes that the shooting comes from an ambush. Suddenly the word ‘franc-tireurs’ is shouted wildly, men point up the rock face and seize their rifles, and start a senseless fusillade. The firing is only ended gradually with the order ‘cease fire!’

Meanwhile, I did not let the people out of my sight. They shudder when they heard the word ‘franc-tireur’. But does that prove their bad conscience? Is it not more likely that they have a sense of foreboding of the vengeance that destroyed them.\footnote{Ibid., as cited in Horne and Kramer, 172-3.}

A Major Schlick ordered the execution, but one Captain d' Elsa (son of the commander of the XIIth Army Corps) attempted to stop him.\footnote{Ibid., as cited in Horne and Kramer, 173.} Unfortunately, he was unsuccessful. Shots were fired! “I turn to look: a terrible sight! A block of humans writhing, trembling, falling… the cries of women and children… the second salvo… a convulsion of bodies on the ground in wild confusion. I see people still alive who crawl behind the dying, and I turn away…. ”\footnote{Ibid.} What Paul Reime soon discovered was that a group of captured French infantry soldiers were the actual ‘franc-tireurs.’
Our ‘executioners’ arrive, grim, silent. One of them, a reserve, bursts into tears[…]

We are sitting with Tennhardt on a bed of straw, shivering, and unable to sleep. ‘Why’, T. asks me, ‘didn’t we punch the major [i.e. Schlick] in the face?’ and adds, ‘because we are cowards.’

‘No’, I say, ‘because we do not know each other, we don’t trust each other… because we do not have an organization of resistance against this organization of murder.’

The accounts continued. Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux, in his autobiography, described another atrocity he heard while coming across a fourteen year old riding a bike on 10 September:

“He is from Vaumoise, where the Prussians lived for ten days; the bicycle he rides belonged to his brother of sixteen, whom they killed. They shot every child they saw on a bicycle.”

Christian Mallet, a French soldier, described what he saw as well:

Although we hardly saw any Germans during this first month, we could, per contra, follow them by the traces of their crimes.

By day, from village to village, lamentations spread from one horizon to the other, and I regret not having noted the names of the places which were the scenes of the atrocities of which I saw the sequels. I regret not having taken the names of the unhappy women whose children, brothers and husbands had been tortured and shot without motive, not to speak of the outrages which they themselves had undergone, not to speak of the assaults of lechery and Sadism of which they had been the victims. They alluded to these in a fury or rage or made an involuntary confession in an agony of humiliation and grief.

By night a furrow of fire traced the enemy’s path. The Germans burnt everything that was susceptible of being burnt—ricks, barns, farms, entire villages, which blazed like torches, lighting the country-side with a weird light.

We entered villages of which nothing remained except smoking and calcined stones, before which families, who had lost their all, grieved and wrung their powerless hands at the sight of some black débris which had once been all their joy, their hearth and home.

I wish particularly to insist that these deeds were not the result of accident, for we were daily witnesses of them for a whole month. I still shiver when I think of the confidences which I have received. The pen may not write down all the facts, all the abominations, all the hatefull [sic] things, all the lowest and most degrading filthiness

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195 Ibid. At least Paul Reime showed remorse at the time. As shall be seen, others showed less humanity.

196 Giraudoux, 243-4.
inspired by the imagination of crazy erotomaniacs. It was always Sadism which seemed to guide their acts and predominate amongst their misdeeds.

Here a mother mourned a child, shot from some childish prank; there a young girl grieved for her fiancé, hung because he was of military age; farther on a helpless old man had had his house pillaged and had been brutally treated because he had nothing else to offer. At every step we heard the story of crime, and those guilty deserve to be hung. Such are the things of which such an enemy was capable—an enemy who refused combat, who advanced hastily under cover of night to rob and burn a defenceless village, and who seemed to vanish like smoke at the approach of our troops, leaving in our hands hardly more than some drunken stragglers unable to regain their army, or some robbers who had waited behind to rob a house or to violate a woman, and had been taken in the act.197

Mallet noted in his diary on 9 August how, “The Germans flee, burning the villages, killing women and children.”198 B. C. Myatt, from the British Army, also noted what he saw as he passed Compeign on 7 October, writing, “The Germans had left their mark all around here by burning villages down and assaulting women and killing civilians.”199

Not only did the Germans soldiers execute civilians, they also used them as human shields against their enemies. In an attack on the towns of Embourg and Chadfontaine, the Germans used a human shield of roughly two hundred civilians to protect themselves.200 The German army’s use of a human shield, which included women and children, occurred again while attacking the town of Boncelles.201 British soldiers also recorded the German army’s usage of civilians as human shields, as one “old contemptible” described, “The swine are doing

197 Mallet, 31-3.
198 Mallet, 35.
199 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
201 Ibid., 49, as cited in Horne and Kramer, 17.
all sorts of low down things. In one case they drove civilian women and children in front of them,—our men would not fire but rushed at them with their bayonets and fought till they were all killed, which was inevitable on account of the numbers.”202 At Mons, T. H. Cubbon reported that the Germans “drove out the inhabitants before them making them carry white flags.”203 Cubbon continued, stating that the Germans, “chased the inhabitants in front of them for protection….”204

Why? Why did the German soldiers act in this manner and not the French and British? Part of the issue related to the logistical situation. French troops did not go into Germany, except in the area of Alsace, which was not really true hostile territory. German troops occupied the hostile territories of Belgium and northern France. Fear of the francs-tireurs played no small role, either. Though the threat was minimal, the perceived threat seemed real and dangerous to the German soldiers. Another factor involved the area of conflict. The German troopers fought in urbanized areas, where shots came from any direction and any building window. Urban conflict in hostile territory was a frightening experience to soldiers in general, not just German. The perceived threat of the francs-tireurs and the realities of urban warfare helped create this situation of atrocity.

Another possible cause to these actions stemmed from the institution of the German Army itself. Historian Isabel V. Hull argued that “military necessity,” an ideology of the

202 Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. This is also found in Sergeant T. H. Cubbon, 78/4/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.


204 Ibid., 21.
German Army, dictated the institution’s actions in war.\(^{205}\) With that culture, Hull contended, “…the Imperial German military repeatedly resorted to terrific violence and destruction in excess of Germany’s own security requirements or political goals, in contravention of international norms, and even contrary to ultimate military effectiveness.”\(^{206}\) The author argued the German Constitution allowed the army to operate outside the realm of German law; therefore, no safeguard or civilian check existed.\(^{207}\) The German army demonstrated, …the conviction (indeed requirement) of one’s qualitative superiority over one’s enemies; a romantic ruthlessness and actionism (exaggerated drive for action [\textit{Aktionsimus}] in the part of officers in order to bridge the gap between risk and reality; and finally the acceptance of self-destruction (and thus the willingness to destroy everyone else, as well).\(^{208}\) Romantic ruthlessness! Though Hull maintained that the army operated outside the public realm, she conceded that the institution was “the foremost instrument of national integration (‘the school of the nation’).”\(^{209}\) The author also admitted the following point: “The more sacrosanct national sovereignty, the larger its demands for sacrifice from its own soldiers and civilians, and the weaker the limits of international law on its actions against others.”\(^{210}\) Thus, the German Army and the German culture were intertwined. Romantic nationalism, with its sacrosanct


\(^{206}\) Hull, 1.

\(^{207}\) Ibid., 2.

\(^{208}\) Ibid., 2-3.

\(^{209}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{210}\) Ibid., 326.
elements, influenced the mentality of the army, an organization with no braking mechanisms. This army believed in the idea of military necessity, it allowed whatever it took to win. The Kriegraison, or a Machiavellian notion on how to fight war, existed within this institution.

Survival and victory were the beliefs of the day within the German Army. As the Great War loomed, the German Army believed it must obtain victory for not only its survival, but also for the survival of Germany. As Hull noted, “The war also seemed to confirm the military’s indispensability and its paranoid view of existential struggle; in a world of total victory or total defeat, there could be no negotiation, only fighting on until death and destruction enveloped everything.”

Germany faced enemies on both sides of its land, and the army felt it needed to preserve the state, and the nation, through any means. If that meant “atrocities,” then so it was. In essence, the German Army believed brutality was a continuation of policy.

This mentality manifested itself onto the German soldiers. The army high command believed in the use of violence to achieve order and stability for itself, and the military used order to control violence. To achieve this, it sought to instill discipline and order onto the conscripts during training. A problem arose. “Military discipline, which was partly designed to stop individual atrocities, also meant, however, that massacres ordered or even suggested from above would likely be carried out.”

The German Army also showed a propensity for sweeping the internationally accepted mores under the military rug. During the Franco-Prussian War, the German Army faced the francs-tireurs threat and the resistance of the French to surrender even after their army was

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211 Ibid., 329.

212 Ibid., 100.

213 Ibid., 100-1.
defeated; the German Army moved toward a “more total form of war.” Summary executions and destruction of property occurred with little recourse from commanding officers. This mentality, aside from summary executions, made its way to the Kriegs-Etappen-Ordnung, or War Stage Order. This army manual allowed soldiers to apply collective punishment to civilians in incidents of sabotage and to force service as hostages for threatened railways. In addition, new recruits had limited information on the restrictions to treatment of civilians, as agreed to at the Hague Convention on Land Warfare in 1899. In addition, members of the army command believed in the concept of reciprocity—if the enemy breaks the norms of warfare, then Germany need not abide by them as well. The point here involved perception. If Germany perceived the break, then it could act as it wanted.

Thus, the German soldiers operated on the premises of the German Army High Command’s philosophy. Their actions in Belgium and northern France stemmed from “military necessity.” The troopers training involved this notion, and aspects of this belief found itself into army literature and official pamphlets. These were the “rules of the game” in which the German soldiers played, and for Belgium and northern France, they played roughly.

Rape, however, served no “military necessity.” Francis Wilson Huard, an American woman who ran a Red Cross near the Marne, came across refugees who were caught by the Germans, and one refugee in particular, caught her attention:

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214 Ibid., 118.
215 Ibid., 119.
216 Ibid.
217 Ibid., 120.
218 Ibid., 127-8.
…an elderly man told us how his caravan had been caught by the Germans, stripped of everything they possessed, separated from their women folk, and with armed sentries back of them had been forced to work at the building of a temporary bridge to replace the one the French had blow up.

“I got off easy—with only a few welts from a raw-hide,” he murmured, “but my brother (and he pointed to a very stout masculine figure rolled in a blanket and sitting motionless on the steps of an abandoned road house)—“my brother’s nearly done for! You see he’s near-sighted and not used to manual labor, and every time he missed his nail with the hammer, the German coward would jab him in the ribs with the point of his bayonet. Seventy-two wounds!”

“And your women?”

“God knows what they did to them! My wife hasn’t stopped sobbing since we met. She’s dazed—I can’t make her talk.”

Mrs. Huard could only assume, and sadly, the assumed worst occurred quite frequently.

Rape was the worst. It was an act of atrocity committed by the German soldiers, and the accounts were numerous and inhumane. One example of this involved a sixteen year old girl at Aarschot who testified that she was raped by eighteen German soldiers on a daily basis. In the town of Chateau-Thierry in the Aisne, a French girl, aged fourteen, was abducted by a German soldier and raped at bayonet-point. She was violated a second time and “only escaped a third outrage when she ‘cried so [hard] that the [last] did not dare do as his comrades’, and returned home bleeding and in pain.” Another instance of rape occurred in Ferte-Gaucher (Seine-et-Marne), where historian Ruth Harris described one woman’s traumatic event:

…four Germans arrived, stole her money and murdered the Frenchman who tried to defend her. Forced to step over the dead man’s body, she was raped, saw another woman raped, and then was raped again and again. In relating this tale, she revealed what was in

219 Huard, 256-7.

220 Horne and Kramer, 196-204.

221 Ibid. They rely on archives from both Paris and Brussels.


223 Ibid.
her view one of the most bizarre aspects of the encounter: in the midst of the mayhem, 
the Germans calmly drank their coffee, a detail which epitomized their utter callousness 
to the pain they were inflicting.224

The callousness was disturbing. Even war correspondents, from The War Illustrated 5 
September 1914, alluded to the acts, “The things done to Belgian girls and women [by German 
soldiers], before their tortured, lifeless bodies with battered faces were thrown into a ditch, are so 
unspeakably dreadful that details cannot be printed.”225

The stories of rape reached the French soldiers. One French soldier showed more 
concern for his wife than his wound, as the Red Cross nurse, Mrs. Huard, relayed in her account.

“…My God, my wife and babies, shut up in Valenciennes. It isn’t this that’s killing me,” 
he continued, slapping his bandaged arm. “It’s only a flesh wound in the shoulder. But 
it’s the other—the other thoughts. I’ve seen them at their work, the pack of cursed 
cowards! but if they ever touch my wife! Perhaps they have, the dirty blackguards, and 
I’m not there to defend her. Curse them all!”

And he beat his fist on his knees in rage. Then anger, and agony having reached a 
paroxysm, his lips trembled, his mouth twitched, and brusquely throwing his arm around 
my neck, he buried his head on my shoulder and burst into tears.226

The fear of German soldiers caused this French soldier to weep: “For a full quarter-hour he 
sobbed like a child—this great sturdy fellow of thirty-five…”227

The British noted accounts of rape. B. C. Myatt wrote about his experience rescuing the 
town of Obers on 17 October, writing, “The German divils [sic] had shot women and children 
and old people here and disgraced young girls galore. God help England if we are defeated by

224 Ibid., 175. Harris relies on Les documents relatives a la guerre, 1914-1915-1916- 
1917-1918: rapports et procesverbaux d’enquete de la commission instituee en vue do constater 


226 Huard, 187-8.

227 Ibid., 188.
Myatt continued, stating, “… the people had started to flock back to their homes which had all been ruined by the drunken German beasts. Women were telling us of the German deeds and young girls who had been disgraced. Also old men who had been tied up and pricked with bayonets by the swine….”

Some females fortunately escaped. French trooper Christian Mallet noted one such escape when he befriended a fifteen year old peasant girl. According to the soldier, the “rather ugly” peasant girl stayed at her family’s farm to look after her paralyzed grandfather while the rest of her family fled. “She had remained faithful to her duty in spite of the bombardment, the battle at their very door and the ill-treatment of the Bavarian soldiers who were billeted in the farm.”

She told us how, faithful to her oath, she was alone when the Bavarians came knocking at her door, how she lived three days with them, a butt for their innumerable coarsenesses, sometimes brutally treated when the soldiers were sober, sometimes pursued by their gross assiduities when they were drunk; how one night she had to fly half naked through the rain, slipping out through the vent-hole of the cellar, to escape being violated by a group of madmen, not daring to go to bed again, sleeping fully dressed behind a small copse; how at last French chasseurs had put the Bavarians to flight and had in their turn installed themselves in the farm, and how among them she felt herself protected and respected.

Atrocity occurred. Rape had little to do with civilians shooting, urban conflict, or “military necessity.” The numbers and accounts pointed to acts of violence, acts that fell “below

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228 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
229 Ibid.
230 Mallet, 75-7.
231 Mallet, 75-6.
232 Ibid.
233 Ibid., 76-7.
the military horizon” of soldiery. Professionalism became secondary to emotion and
*Kriegraison*. Germany, itself, desired to march through Belgium. It did not have to do so. The
French plan called for reclaiming the lost provinces of Alsace-Lorraine, not for occupying
Belgium. As for the British, they were not there to occupy any territory. The nature of the
situation demonstrated the militaristic and emotive nature of Germany itself. The German nation
operated on the idea of *Kriegraison*. Ideas of the enlightenment, such as toleration, progress,
equality, and freedom, were ignored by the German state and portions of its soldiers because
German romantic nationalism rejected those ideas. German romantic nationalism operated under
the philosophies its development was based. Members of the German army operated under those
same beliefs, beliefs that rejected the Enlightenment. The accounts and numbers told the story.

**Conclusion**

War plans, fear, “military necessity,” and ideas about German romantic nationalism
influenced the soldiers of Germany. Enthusiasm for the war, with few exceptions, existed
among the conscripted soldiers Germany. This enthusiasm reflected ideas stemming from the
romantic nationalism of German culture. Combatants shared the ideas of this movement in their
personal accounts and letters. However, the “baptism of fire” produced the true psyche of the
German soldier. The ordeal generated mixed results. For some, the baptism strained, and even
destroyed, their adherence and faith in the German nation, but for others, the devotion to the
romantic nation continued. The notion of camaraderie, however, served as a common theme.
Yet, even in camaraderie, romantic nationalist sentiment wielded its influence. Who the German
nation included was subjected to restriction. Limitations of professionalism also occurred. Fear
in hostile territory and the idea of *Kriegraison* produced acts of atrocities. German war planning
contributed to this situation by going through Belgium and thinking in terms of total victory.
Conscripted soldiers demonstrated a lack of professionalism and soldiery once placed in this environment. Yet, in the minds of German Army Command and the German soldiers, they acted professionally in terms of striving to achieve total victory at any cost. The culture of Germany allowed this. The influence of romantic nationalism fueled this event. Though the situation was critical for the German combatants, the rape of women was not acceptable. These events fell “below the military horizon,” just like the members of the German Army who carried out these deeds.
CHAPTER FOUR
THE FRENCH SOLDIER: THE DEVOTED SCHIZOPHRENIC

Camaraderie, courage, and devotion to romantic-rational nationalism braced the French soldiers against both the initial German onslaught and the issues surrounding the French Army. Enthusiasm for war existed amidst the French soldiers, which translated to nationalism. French nationalism shared attributes of both the romantic nationalism of Germany and the rational nationalism of Great Britain. The French troopers’ accounts demonstrated ideas of the enlightenment interwoven with romanticism, thus producing a hybrid form of nationalism. The combatants experienced issues with regard to discipline and army command in training, which hurt the army’s cause during the initial fighting. The “baptism of fire” demonstrated this. During that ordeal, the French Army fared poorly. Redemption, however, followed. Romantic-rational nationalism aided the French soldiers’ recovery from initial losses during the war as well as questions regarding leadership and discipline in the army. Camaraderie, which was instilled during training, played no small role in the upturn. Courage existed within the French units. French soldiers shared similar experiences with German and British soldiers, but they reacted with a strong devotion to French nationalism, which proved more inclusive and less barbaric than the Germany variety.

**Enthusiasm**

The French soldiers of 1914 demonstrated an overall enthusiasm for the war. The majority wanted to demonstrate the power of France by defeating the Germans; nevertheless, there were combatants who showed disbelief in the possibility of an “enlightened Europe” going
to arms. This enthusiasm was an aspect of nationalism, a nationalism comprised of romance and rationality.

For some French troopers, war produced a mixture of emotion. Jules Émile Henches, a future French combatant, disliked the prospect of war: “I curse war. I can find only in my horror sufficient hatred to do my best.”

Born (1892) and raised in Normandy, Henri Nadel found that waiting for action dulled his ardor: “Day after day went by, sweeping into dust my warlike enthusiasm.”

Christian Mallet, whose mother resided in Versailles, also demonstrated these mixed feelings:

Of all my experiences, of all the unforgettable memories which the war has woven with threads of fire unquenchable in my mind, of all the hours of feverish expectancy, joy, pain, anguish and glorious action, none stands out—nor ever will—more clearly in my recollection than the day when we marched out of Rheims. Nothing remains, except a confusion of disconnected memories of the days of waiting and of expectation, days nevertheless when one’s hear beat fast and loud. A bugle-call sounding the “fall-in” lifts the curtain on a new act in which, the empty years behind us, we are spurring our horses on into the eternal battle between life and death.

His mixed emotions manifested themselves during a conversation with a canteen-keeper, who was horrified by the coming war.

“The Bosches here? No, indeed, Flora, you are talking wildly; never you doubt, we will send them to the right-about and back to Berlin at the point of our toes—give us another glass of white wine—the best—that’s better worth doing.”

“Well, well!”

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2 Nadel, 32.

3 Mallet, 13. He noted that his mother resided in Versailles, 40-3. The point is made to try to give Mallet some geographic origin for the purposes of this work.
At the table where I sat with my own particular friends, all were in high spirits, all talking the greatest nonsense, becoming intoxicated with their own words as they romanced of heroic charges, of wonderful forced marches and highly fantastic battles; I alone remained somewhat serious and heavy of heart, and abused myself for being less free of care than they in the face of this triumph of manliness and youthful high spirits….⁴

Despite the diverse sentiments, the prospect of war and embarking for the front produced enthusiasm. Maurice Ernst, a déraciné, rejoiced at the news of war.⁵ Henri Nadel followed, describing his feelings in July 1914 while in Prague. He wrote, “I must confess that I even had a secret and somewhat shamefaced desire for something exciting to happen.”⁶ As war appeared more likely, he and his friends followed the events:

Helpless, we watched the disaster fall upon us. We were like a brood of new-hatched chicks, mesmerized by the stare of a hawk. But this interval of stupor was followed by a frenzy—the exhilaration of battle. So many enemies were attacking Germany that our victory could not be long delayed.⁷

The frenzy continued, and not just with Nadel: “Delirium seized us all. Deserters returned to France. Old men enlisted.”⁸ He pondered enlisting, since he was in Prague at the time; he decided to do so for fear that he would miss it, as it were like a carnival of fun.⁹ Others did not want to miss out “on all of the fun,” either. As Nadel described a “peasant from Auvergne,” the point was supported: “He had deserted some years before, and had established himself in

⁴ Ibid., 17-8.

⁵ Belmont, 9. A déraciné was one who was born of an Alsatian father and a Savoyard mother. Maurice Ernst’s father was art critic, Alfred Ernst.

⁶ Nadel, 21.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 22.

⁹ Ibid.
Switzerland. He could have stayed there…. There was nothing to draw him to France, but when he saw so many going he could not resist. He followed. And he was guzzling to prevent any possible regrets.”

Soldiers that Nadel encountered on the way to enlist were marching toward the front. He inquired about their destination, of which they replied, “They had no idea. They were going to fight.”

In a letter dated 5 August from Annecy, the send off and cheer of both soldiers and crowds impressed Captain Ferdinand Belmont. The American woman, Frances Wilson Huard, described an incident involving a crying female houseguest, whose son left for the front. Her son’s note read, “‘I’ve just received my notice. Am leaving at once. Have taken the two francs that are on the mantel. Jean.’” Mrs. Huard reflected on this action, writing, “I cannot say what an impression that brief but heroic note made upon me. In my mind it has always stood as characteristic of that wonderful national resolution to do one’s duty, and to make the least possible fuss about it.” The son went forward, knowing his duty.

French trooper J. Georges Scapini spent time in Salies-de-Béarn, Normandy, and Biarritz throughout the course of his life. On an excessively hot day in August, he marched toward the Ardennes, and he reflected on the coming combat:

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10 Ibid., 24-5.

11 Ibid., 25.

12 Ibid., 39.

13 Huard, 20.

14 Ibid. “‘Je viens de recevoir ma feuille. Je pars de suite. Je prends les deux francs sur la cheminée. Jean.’”

15 Ibid.

16 See Scapini, A Challenge to Darkness.
But, despite the fatigue of the journey, I was light-hearted. I had no conception of what war was like; I had a confused notion of it as a great, dangerous adventure in which glory went side by side with death. I felt I was contributing to the defense of my country, attacked by a nation whose formidable strength I appreciated. My mind was still full of the acclamations and the emotion shown by the crowds who had saluted us all the way from Dieppe to the Ardennes. I was far from imagining the tragic and horrible chronicle, the first page of which we were about to write.  

In a letter dated 4 August, Captain Ferdinand Belmont, of the Chasseurs Alpins, described the enthusiasm as well, writing,

Nor should I ever have believed there was such enthusiasm, such unanimous and admirable confidence in all these men, many of whom are married and fathers, and who generously go forth, without a complaint, without a murmur. And all along our way war songs are heard—the *Marseillaise* and the *Chant du Départ*; with shouting from one train to another at the crossings or in the stations. The whole way alongside the line women and children cheer and wave their handkerchiefs, while very often weeping.

Seeing such enthusiasm and generosity in those who suffer most from war, one would be very vile if one did not set out heartily when, as in my own case, everything is for the best.  

After reaching Macot, near the Alps in the Alpine Valley, Belmont continued, writing on 10 August that, “Our task is facilitated by the men’s admirable willingness.” On 16 August, he even shared how disappointed he was by not being involved in any action to date, writing, “…many of our comrades or friends are receiving their baptism of fire on the frontier. In spite of everything, we are somewhat ashamed at this present hour to live in such repose and quiet.”  

Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux also described the ardor of those August days in 1914. On 17 August in Alsace, he recorded:

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17 Scapini, 50.
18 Belmont, 38.
19 Ibid., 42.
20 Ibid., 51.
Beyond the frontier at last! Yet, as we wake to find ourselves stretched out in our cramped hayloft, it is an effort to remember that Alsace lies asleep close by—remember it and feel glad of it. Our bodies are weary, our minds dusky—then, all at once, the thought that the regiment has really started strikes home. Up we leap, half dressed, strange beings rising swift as resurrected creatures out of the hay about us, bemoaning the stiffness of arms and legs and backs. The straws have left red marks on our hands and our sore cheeks, and we shall look till night as if we had slept between the Tertiary and Quarternary periods.21

René Benjamin, a French soldier, followed suit: "Ah, the Alboches, they want war? Very well, we’ll make them see war up close! And what’s more, we will do so well heeled, well turned out, well armed! So lets go, fill up these train wagons! Ah, the pigs!! [sic]"22

French enthusiasm for war recognized no political boundaries. Robert E. Pellissier demonstrated this point. Pellissier, though born in France in 1882, moved to the United States of America in 1896, where he spent his life studying romance languages.23 When war broke, he returned to France and volunteered in the chasseurs à pied, an elite group, who occupied the Vosges Mountains of Alsace in 1914.24 From there, he wrote letters describing the events of combat. He showed some apprehension after he arrived on 2 September, writing, “Never in the world shall I be equal to this kind of life. I am a fool.”25 His mood changed while training, and on 12 October, he penned, “…I am more satisfied every day that I did the right thing in coming

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21 Giraudoux, 3.


23 Pellissier, xxiii. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard University and taught at Stanford University.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., 11.
over. I would have had a lifelong remorse if I had not.”

Captain G. P. Capart of Belgium wrote a book focusing on the French poilu as opposed to Belgian soldiers because of his attachment to his ancestors—his great-grandparents fought for Napoleon Bonaparte. Even the war-hating Jules Émile Henches alluded to the idea that war seemed necessary: “I think that Germany must be humiliated. The easiest means to do so is by force of arms.”

The Romantic-Rational Soldier

Enthusiasm was a manifestation of French nationalism, a hybrid of ideas from both the romanticism and the Enlightenment. Henri Nadel felt this love for France:

Naturally gentle and of a peaceable temperament, I loved my country more for its traditions of liberal thought than for the glory of its armies. I admired it for having enfranchised, not for having conquered, Europe. I knew no lovelier province than its language, no richer colonies than the books of its writers, and I should gladly have answered any one who vaunted the naval, industrial, military of commercial superiority of another nation, “France surpasses them all, for her kingdom is not of this world.”

He continued, demonstrating the influence of the Enlightenment on French nationalism, writing, “For the Germans I felt no hate. I was not aware of them at all. To talk of revenge seemed to me foolish. What was our army good for?” Ideas of the enlightenment continued to manifest themselves in his thoughts: “I believed in happiness, in the slow but sure progress of

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26 Ibid., 24. Somewhat humorously, he bruised his knee during a drill, and had second thoughts because of it: “The worst of it is that this accident has taken away my self-confidence—my knee, the rain…--all these things depress me more than I can tell. What shall I do in trenches?” 25.

27 See Capart, A Blue Devil of France. The term “poilu” refers a French infantryman.

28 Henches, 2, as cited in Smith, The Embattle Self, 28.

29 Nadel, 17.

30 Ibid.
civilization, in the general good-will of mankind, in the good intentions of nations, in the United States of Europe.”

J. Georges Scapini also noted his ideas of French civilization. He reflected on playing a game as a child in Salies-de-Béarn called “redskins, or savages,” which, “of course that meant war. In those happy days I thought that only savages would make war; not until afterwards did I come to realize that there might be exceptions to this rule.” The idea that western society, through a French nationalistic point of view, could not make war, suggested the influence of the ideas of the enlightenment. He continued his reflection: “I was the white man and, proud of the prerogative I enjoyed because of my superior civilization, I borrowed as a weapon an air gun. It made a noise! I was delighted.” Christian Mallet also noted the enlightenment aspects of French nationalism, thinking war was not a possibility in this age of progress. As late as 30 July, Mallet reflected, “I did not believe in the possibility of war or of mobilization…” He continued that train of thought, writing, “War, I repeated to myself, it is foolish even to think of, and this talk of war is but the outcome of some disordered pessimistic minds; and with that I went to sleep on my hard little webbed bed… for the last time.” Still, when the announcement came, Mallet responded, even being involved in the first wave of French soldiers marching forward. His words said it all:

31 Nadel, 18.
32 Scapini, 10-1.
33 Ibid., 11.
34 Mallet, 14.
35 Ibid., 14-5.
In three hours we should be on the way to an unknown destination; to ourselves fell the honour of being the advance guard; to us the task of guarding and watching the frontiers whilst the rest of the army was mobilising; and with keen pride in the fact, we held up our heads and thrust out our chests, whilst our faces took on a look of confidence in our power to conquer. Even the humblest trooper seemed transfigured, and in that moment I realised, perhaps for the first time, the high soul France.36

For the French nation, for the “high soul” of France, Mallet marched forward, as he reflected,

From that moment I was to think no more of myself. All was over with affairs that bound heart or fancy. The supreme moment had come when words no longer count, and when the eyes try to fill themselves with one last gaze upon those whom one is leaving—goodbye to family, to love, to self; to the joy of the living—all one’s soul goes out in this last gaze.

This look would say, “Farewell, I will be brave, never doubt it, don’t cry, don’t suffer regrets.” This look embraces all that life has meant up to now, whether of joy or sorrow. It is final—a farewell, a promise—it signifies the end—all one’s very soul is in one’s eyes.37

The fatalism of romanticism, which influenced German nationalism, was also present in French nationalism. Sergeant Léo Latil, of Aix-en-Provence, suggested as much, writing

“Sacrifices will be light indeed,” in a letter to his family, “if we gain a right glorious victory and more light for souls....”38 His will, written before his departure, read “Pray for France, work for


37 Ibid., 22. Unfortunately for Mallet, in a somewhat comical sense, he forgot his water-bottle full of soup as he embarked, thus exclaiming, “‘Oh, my water-bottle’—a real calamity it seemed—empires might crumble; I should have no soup to-morrow morning—all my outlook on war is shrouded in gloom.”

France, raise her up!”

Maurice Ernst, who received his education in Paris and Dijon, respectively, hinted as much when he wrote his mother before reaching the front:

I cannot say whether we shall see each other again…. At all events, I am living splendid hours at the present time, even before I have fought. To have the command of sixty men for whom one is responsible unto death, and whose minds are sustained and movements guided by the clearness of an order, is a rare joy. But it is a still greater joy to feel that one may be called upon to die on the first day perhaps. That gives one a feeling of solemn and gentle serenity at the same time which must, if one escapes, leave its mark on one’s whole life.

For the cause, Maurice Ernst received this “joy;” he was shot in the head at Ethe, Belgium on 22 August, 1914. Paul Lintier also displayed a sense of fatalism for the French nation. On 22 August, he described that idea, writing, “My destiny must be sacrificed to the accomplishment of higher destinies. It is the life of my country, of everything I love, and of everything I miss at this instant. If I am to be dead to myself, I consent; it is done! I would have thought it harder than this.”

Future combatant, Jean Galtier-Boissière, also felt he could sacrifice for France, writing,

Unworried about tomorrow, proud of the confidence of the civilians, delighted at the idea of seeing the country and of winning battles, ready to make any sacrifice for France. Without anybody ordering it, we started singing as loudly as we could the only song that could accompany this triumphal march:

_Allons, enfants de la Patrie,_

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39 Ibid.


41 Ibid.

Le jour de gloire est arrivé! Jean Belmont shared a similar sentiment, when he wrote his mother about his pending departure: “I have nothing to fear. The worst that can happen to me is to be killed, and to die for a noble cause when one is young is a great blessing.” Jean Belmont died for his noble cause, killed during his trial by fire on 29 August, 1914 near Saint-Dié.

Jean’s brother, Ferdinand, also demonstrated the romantic dimensions of French nationalism. Even one Lieutenant Gonnet suggested as much while writing about Ferdinand Belmont, noting,

He speaks a good deal of that romanticism which attracted so many young men, to who the war brought natural satisfaction. He hardly confessed it, but I believe that he also had very romantic tendencies. Only he accepted the ordeal with all its tribulations, whereas many others found it severe and wearisome to the flesh, and sought to lighten it.

Belmont was born in Lyons but moved to Grenoble in the southeast when he was very young. He went forward to the frontier in early August toward the Alpine Valley; and while there, he shared his feelings toward France, writing in a letter dated 8 August,

Here, in the semi-solitude of these mountains, where news reaches us tardily, everybody retains the same calm confidence, the same generous and resolute coolness, and all these fine fellows who were dragged yesterday from their wives’ hearths and occupations are preparing in no half-hearted manner and without unprofitable excitement, to defend the honour of the country.

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44 Belmont, 16.

45 Ibid.

46 Ibid., 14.

47 Ibid., 11.
One must live through hours like these to be able to comprehend that “Patrie” is no vain word, to feel in its generous beauty the grandeur of the army, which rises superior to all littleness or routine, and to estimate men at their true value. It is good to be a Frenchman at this hour; it is above all good to see what devotion, energy, sacrifice and honour spring from the depths of this nation which has been reproached so gratuitously abroad with being boastful, heedless and frivolous.

This is indeed, at one and the same time, the military servitude and grandeur of which Vigny wrote, and there is no paradox in uniting these two words, apparently so contradictory. 48

To defend his nation’s honor; that was the sacrifice those French soldiers were making. As Belmont continued to write, the mentality of fatalism and piety, aspects of romanticism, seeped into his words, as demonstrated in a letter dated 10 August:

We are in the hands of God and feel it more than ever; we are so little capable of passing judgment on events! The greatest and most useful lesson of the history of our world is precisely the one which proves to us that we are without discernment for judging the present. The divine lessons of the past ought to enable us to regard the future without emotion. I fancy that war is one of God’s great means of teaching a lesson to the nations and moulding [sic] their destinies. 49

Later, piety manifested itself again. In a letter dated 20 August from Macot, Belmont recorded,

Who knows whether this formidable contest in which all the Powers stand face to face is not the redeeming devastation permitted by God in order to efface the stains which soiled the eldest daughter of the Church! Leaning over the terrifying abyss which has just opened at our feet, we tremble when we think of the extent and range of such events, and especially at the thought of the issue of this unprecedented struggle. 50

The influence of French nationalism, as well as the desire for combat, was indeed present in Belmont’s thoughts and words, as he continued in the 10 August letter:

France is a mine of resource; she possesses above all marvelous moral and mental faculties, strengthened by the news of early successes—faculties which are never uncombined with this good nature, this spontaneous and somewhat jocular fancy, that picturesque embellishment of the Parisian street-boy who is never lacking in Gallic wit.

48 Ibid., 41. Aldred de Viny was a 19th century French poet.

49 Ibid., 44.

50 Ibid., 56-7.
I hope, moreover, that we shall have an opportunity of seeing all these fine men at work, and it would indeed be a pity not to take part, in our turn, at the ball.51

In a 13 August letter, Belmont went further while criticizing the locals for their drinking alcohol.52 He alluded to the idea that France needed a return to the past, writing the people were,

…physical slaves of their vices, socially useless, if not dangerous. Among the dangers which now threaten France, this one is perhaps as redoubtable as the cannon and bayonets of the Germans!

Ah! what need France will have to return to the old beliefs upon which she is established and which support her still at the present hour!

Perhaps this war which is beginning is the sheet-anchor held out by God to this drifting country, in order to bring it back to Him, who loved and protected it so much. That would be the real triumph and victory of to-morrow: *Gesta Dei per Francos*?53

The romantic influence continued its presence in French nationalism. Part of romanticism was a rejection of the modern era. Belmont, in a 16 August letter, wrote about such ideology:

But, alas! everything is passing away. Destructive civilization, with its motor-cars and railways, is spreading everywhere, and already a few dresses which smack of the boulevard form a blemish among these ancient local costumes, so becoming on these robust and rough-hewn women, who retain the hard profile, pure and firmly designed features of their Moorish ancestors.54

The idea of a better French nation existed amongst French soldiers, as was the notion of a future ideal German nation present amongst the German soldiers. Captain Belmont desired such a change. In a letter dated 20 August from Macot, he wrote about the unity of France as well as the hope for a “brave new world:”

We have no right to complain about it. Under present circumstances private interests disappear; there is only a single interest, a single cause to which all, without distinction of

51 Ibid., 45.
52 Ibid., 46.
53 Ibid., 48. *Gesta Dei per Francos* would translate as “the deeds of God through the Franks.” It is a reference to Guibert de Nogent’s account of the first crusade.
54 Ibid., 51.
class, party or opinion, are rallying. France is setting an admirable example at the present time by making a clean sweep of all the differences which have so long divided her. Republicans, royalists, anarchists, socialists exist no longer; there are only Frenchmen, united in the same movement of solidarity and devotion.

I seem to have a vision of the France of tomorrow, purified by sacrifice and aggrandized by ordeal, issuing from the struggle with a halo of fresh prestige and resuming on the world’s highway the place of honour she was about to abandon.  

Belmont, shortly before his baptism of fire summed up the romantic influence of French nationalism: “Pray that I may, by the grace of God, do my duty honourably. What He wills will come to pass.”

Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux believed the war could, in fact, purify the French nation, thus allowing the nation to reach an ideal state: “Like all the other Frenchmen of this month of August, 1914, who thought to satisfy the war by sacrificing to it in their heart of hearts the hypocrites and knaves of their acquaintance, we feel—though not without a pang of pity—that the cheats and dunces must surely be exposed to death.”

Conscription, Training, Discipline, and Camaraderie

The French Army utilized conscription to keep pace with the German Army, (or vice-versa). The army instillation of training, discipline, and camaraderie proved to have mixed results on the conscripted men. The initial experience of the military was shocking to the new recruits. Discipline suffered, partly due to the soldiers’ perception of commanding officers. Camaraderie, however, provided a sense of comfort and helped the men through the adventure.

J. Georges Scapini described the sentiments of the conscripts when he entered the army

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55 Ibid., 56.

56 Ibid., 57.

57 Giraudoux, 6-7.
in 1912. Upon his initial entry into the barracks, he felt quite alone.58 “Well, rookie, come here,” he heard.59 A French soldier appeared and asked Scapini some questions:

The happy possessor of that charming physiognomy questioned me as to the circumstances which could have compelled me to join the army: Was it poverty? Were you in prison? Are you just out of a house of correction?” He advanced on hypothesis after another to discover reasons which would satisfy his mind and explain the resolution I had taken, in his opinion an unfortunate step.60

Scapini responded,

In order not to disappoint him, I had to invent a story—my family had forced me to enlist on pain of starvation, so I must needs take the consequences, even to death. The man nodded his head gravely, to show that he understood and sympathized with me, then he concluded:

“Your old folks hold a policeman’s club over you. Well, that’s a common enough story, isn’t it?” I gave a sign of assent and assumed a remote, dreamy expression. “Things will straighten themselves out,” he went on consolingly, “and it would be wrong for you to worry. There are plenty of kids like you.” He added with a self-sufficient air, “We do just as we please; the main thing is to know how to look out for ourselves. Take me for instance.” He then related the story of his love affairs.61

Henri Nadel described his feelings when he joined the army, as he wrote, “I felt that I no longer belonged to myself, but that the state had taken possession of me, not leaving me even the liberty to serve it with my best efforts. I was not only one among many, a cipher in a number, a cell of an organism.”62 He continued, writing, “I had to submit blindly to discipline.”63 This loss

58 Scapini, 32.
59 Ibid.
60 Ibid., 33.
61 Ibid., 34.
62 Nadel, 28.
63 Ibid., 28.
of liberty in the army for the collective represented the conflict between the individual versus the collective. Nadel experienced this conflict:

The group was all powerful. It reduced each individual to the same servitude. It was like those overwhelming tides which soon \([sic]\) or late \([sic]\) bring every wave down to the common level of the sea. At night, when the only sound was the deep steady breathing of the sleepers, I would go over my thoughts, only to find that the day had been a series of surrenders. I had hidden my ideas, I had striven not to differ in any way from my fellow soldiers, as though superiority were a thing of which to be ashamed.\(^{64}\)

Despite the conflict, Nadel discovered a seemingly happy medium. As he adjusted to army life, thinking in terms of the collective was not as horrible as he originally thought. It was camaraderie that appealed to the Normandy born Nadel, as he wrote, “My new comrades came from all the corners of France, and even from abroad.”\(^{65}\) He went further down that train of thought, though with some reservation.

Those who, but lately in civilian life, would have looked at me with suspicion and even hatred, now confided to me their fears, their hopes—were we not to suffer together? I had entered into the great family of the people, into that comradeship of the humble—ditch diggers, ragamuffins, pickpockets—which takes in all soldiers and pities them, for they are the most wretched of all human beings, since they do not even own their skins.\(^{66}\)

Still, Nadel showed a sentiment of frustration over the loss of his individualism, writing, “The thought that I was not now my own master, that I was completely at the mercy of any one who happened to rank me, was disheartening.”\(^{67}\)

Nadel noted his impressions of the commanding officers who were responsible for producing the soldiers of France in 1914. His company commander was a reservist who lived in

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\(^{64}\) Ibid., 31.

\(^{65}\) Ibid.

\(^{66}\) Ibid.

\(^{67}\) Ibid., 39.
Paris, and he only seemed to visit headquarters to “sign papers.”\textsuperscript{68} He was rarely seen again for the rest of the day, perhaps due to his many girlfriends.\textsuperscript{69} Nadel’s top sergeant was also a reservist, who was “a very good fellow,” and his platoon sergeant, a former track champion, possessed the ability to strike fear into the hearts of the recruits.\textsuperscript{70} The section sergeant was fat, while the corporal, “…treated the whole platoon like worms…”\textsuperscript{71} According to Nadel, “None of our instructors wanted to see what was going on there [the front].”\textsuperscript{72} Apparently, Nadel showed little admiration for the majority of his commanding officers. Yet, it was their job to instill discipline in the new men. Military crimes were read to men as well as the corresponding punishment: insult to superior officer—five to ten years of hard labor, refusal to obey orders in time of war—five to ten years of hard labor, mutiny—death, and assault on a superior—death.\textsuperscript{73} Because Nadel viewed most of his superiors as lazy or weak, he wrote of the potential problems for the French army: “So by the hands of feeble officers the bonds of discipline were loosened.”\textsuperscript{74} Nadel further noted the flaws of the army and its training when his commanding officer offered him a reserve commission, writing,

\begin{quote}
To his vast astonishment, I refused. I claimed that I did not feel I had the necessary qualifications to command, much less to lead, sixty men into the fire which I had not yet faced myself. I did not understand why a government, which denied me the right to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{68} Ibid., 33-4.

\textsuperscript{69} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., 34-6.

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid., 36-7.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid., 38. Author’s brackets.

\textsuperscript{73} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{74} Ibid., 40.
manage my own estate because I was not yet twenty-one, could at the same time entrust me with the fate of a section.  

J. Georges Scapini also demonstrated a lack of discipline and noted issues with command during his days of training. One day, an older recruit, named Demmet, stayed in bed, and Scapini inquired why:

I asked him, “Why are you in bed? Are you sick?” There was malice in his eyes as he said, “This morning I had cow fodder. In such case I have in reserve a little bluff which never fails—I smoke straw. That goes to my heart, but the essential thing is, you have fever, you are pale, and according to the regulations the doctor exempts you from service. There’s just one drawback, and that is, at such times the doctor gives you a dose of physic. There’s always a fly in the ointment. Well, that makes no difference, they leave me alone for twenty-four hours, and I take it easy.

Scapini also described his comrades and he having a bit of fun at his adjutant’s expense: “Poor Begue [the adjutant] was a very worthy man, no petty rascal, but he was singled out as a victim by fate, and the most ridiculous adventures befell him with pitiless certainty.” Scapini described one such “adventure,” writing,

One evening somebody announced, “Night maneuvers.” Begue, at our head, took the division to a wood in the vicinity of Rouen. We were to attack a thicket supposed to be occupied by an imaginary enemy. Begue, small, slim, and dry as a prune, advanced with the step of a wolf, saber in hand, prepared to hew through the shadows. He turned to us and said in a low voice, so low we could scarcely hear him, “Form in line behind Begue.” We obeyed. He moved a little way farther, assumed a ferocious manner, straightened himself, his muscles all tense, ready for a spring. “Forward!” he yelled. In that instant Rigaud, who had been watching him for a moment, slyly slipped the butt end of his gun between Begue’s legs. The unfortunate Begue, preceded by his saber, crashed into a mass of dead wood amid a tangle of iron. A peal of Homeric laughter shook the whole company. The maneuver was indisputably a failure; for if there had by chance been any enemies in the thicket they would have been forewarned without fail.

75 Ibid., 41.

76 Scapini, 36.

77 Ibid., 39-40.
Rigaud, Ricois, and I hastened precipitately toward the poor adjutant, who was swearing like a trooper. We helped him to rise, brushed his clothes, and handed him his saber. We bestowed upon him many tender, hypocritical attentions.78

Was there a breakdown in discipline or was this just innocent fun had by the future combatants?

Scapini’s actions suggested the former:

One Thursday afternoon the adjutant, who answered to the melodious name of Begue [who referred to himself in the first person], took it into his head to inspect our kits. Rigaud, Ricois, and I were severely criticized on that occasion by the adjutant Begue. “Ah, may gay fellows,” he said, “you think you are going to Paris Saturday—you will get the devil of a disappointment. It is Begue who will tear up your leave permits and Begue gives his word for it and Begue will make you sober.”

Begue never spoke of himself except in the third person. Rigaud, Ricois, and I looked right into his eyes and gazed at him fixedly without uttering a word. His sentence had put us in a serious predicament. When the inspection was over we held a council of war. “We can’t allow that. We absolutely must go to Paris.”

“Ricois had an idea that amounted to genius. “Saturday,” he said to me, “the colonel will review the soldiers. We will hide Begue’s saber. He is so afraid of the colonel’s jawing if he presents himself without his saber we can get anything we want out of him by offering to give the saber back to him.”

Saturday morning the regiment was assembled in the courtyard. Only Rigaud, Ricois, and I remained at the barracks—and also the adjutant Begue, who was hunting for his saber.

“What has Begue done with his saber?” he screamed while running up and down stairs in a frantic manner. “Begue will get a jawing from the colonel.” He came into the dormitory, went out again, looked behind every door, he seemed desperate. I advanced toward him and asked in the most innocent tone, “Are you looking for something, Adjutant?”

“Thunders of God, thunders of God, Begue is looking for his saber!” Rigaud and Ricois came to the rescue, and we all three retorted in chorus, “You are looking for you saber, Adjutant? How strange! We, too—we are looking for the leave permits we have lost. Do you want us to help you find it?”

The adjutant took out his watch. “The colonel will begin his review in five minutes.”

Calmly we continued in chorus, “If we find your saber, perhaps you will find our leave permits, Adjutant?”

“Anything you wish, bandits.”

“Is that a promise, Adjutant?”

“Yes, it is a promise, you band of rascals.”

For a few minutes we looked under the straw mattresses with conscientious care. Begue smoked, boiling over with impatience. All at once Rigaud gave a scream: “Here

78 Ibid., 40.
it is!” pointing to the ceiling. There was the saber swinging gracefully from the ceiling, where we had hung it fifteen minutes before! Begue grew crimson, then his countenance expressed the utmost stupefaction. We fetched a stool and unhooked the saber, and Begue rushed out into the courtyard. We obtained our leaves of absence.79

Scapini continued to see what he could get away with. In July 1914, after meeting a girl, he was distraught because his battalion was to have their heads shaved.80 He felt this would adversely affect his looks, making him less appealing to the girl, so he tried to avoid the trim by stepping into an already inspected line.81 Unfortunately, he was caught and received eight days in prison to teach him “how to respect our discipline.”82 Incidentally, while serving his fifth day, news of war arrived.83

The issues within the French Army continued well into combat. Scapini volunteered for scouting mission with a friend, Chamez, to figure out exactly where Germans were who took part of the trenches.84 During this mission, they encountered Pomeranian grenadiers and escaped, but did not fire at the Pomeranians.85 The French Army Command felt Scapini demonstrated bravery and courage for the French nation; Scapini disagreed, writing how he and Chamez were promoted to “high dignity of soldiers of the first class. Until that day I had supposed that this distinction was reserved for good, brave soldiers who possessed certain

79 Ibid., 36-9. Author’s brackets.
80 Ibid., 45
81 Ibid., 45-8.
82 Ibid., 46-8.
83 Ibid., 48.
84 Ibid., 70.
85 Ibid., 70-1.
qualities that made them outshine all the rest. This was something of a disillusionment for me.**86**

Not all French soldiers, however, saw the issues with the French Army. Captain Ferdinand Belmont, writing in a 4 August letter believed the commanding officers fared well with regard to the preparation of soldiers: “From this point of view progress has indeed been made since 1870!”**87** He later showed much admiration for a Captain Rouse, writing,

> Captain Rousse, who commands the Macot detachment, is indignant. A soldier to the bottom of his soul, one who has guarded with the fidelity of a vestal the sacred fire of the true warrior, he champs the bit with more impatience than ever. One must recognize, however, that, despite his ardent desire to leave, he is the first to set an admirable example of discipline and obedience by restraining himself from protesting and by accepting, notwithstanding his vexation, the inaction to which he is condemned. It is officers like these… who make the French army what it is.**88**

As a captain, Belmont, was, after all, a commanding officer.

Though issues existed in the French Army, the development of camaraderie was not one of those issues. It proved to be a critical component of training, and it helped in combat. Henri Nadel noted this as he wrote, “…I was beginning to love my comrades, their informality, their bluntness, their simplicity, all that at first I had despised; my heart was with them, and to have avoided my share of their wretchedness would have seemed to me treason.”**89** One “ex-trooper,” provided insight on the way camaraderie typically developed in a unit:

> There is a strict but unwritten law of the French Army as regards the canteen: no man may take a drink by himself. *Faire Suisse* is the term applied, if one goes to the canteen alone, and the rest of the men in the conscript’s room look on him as something of a

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86 Ibid., 71.

87 Belmont, 38.

88 Ibid., 52-3.

89 Nadel, 42.
mean fellow if he does such a thing as this. Of course, it works out at the same thing in the end, and share and share alike is not a bad principle, while it is eminently good Republicanism. 

The “ex-trooper” noted how there was an emphasis on sharing. The author continued:

Should Jean go to the canteen alone, punishment awaits him from his comrades. If he is well liked, he will get off with having his bed tipped up after he has got to sleep at night. If he is a surly fellow, he may reckon on what British troops know as a “blanket court-martial,” which means that his comrades of the room will catch him and place him in a blanket, the edges of which are held all round by his fellow soldiers. At a given signal the blanket will be given a mighty heave upward by all who are holding it, and Jean will fly ceiling-ward, to alight again in the black and again be heaved up. This process, repeated a dozen times or so, leaves Jean with not a sufficiency of breath to beg for mercy, while at the same time he is quite undamaged, and, if he is wise, he will not incur the accusation of faire Suisse again.

He may be fool enough to report the matter to his sergeant, as, by the rules of the service, he is entitled to do. In that case the sergeant will threaten Jean’s comrades with punishment for causing annoyance to a man, but the threat, as the me well know, is all that will happen to them—but not all that will transpire as regards Jean. The French soldier abhors a sneak, and treats him as he deserves. Jean will get a rough time for many days to come and will not dare to complain to the sergeant again. It if rough justice, but effective; so long as a many plays the game properly with his fellows, he is all right, and the sergeant knows it.

This allowed the development of camaraderie, which in turn gave rise to that fighting spirit, or the esprit de corps. “Esprit de corps, though now a common phrase in connection with the British army, was first of all a French idiom—and is yet, and an untranslatable one too-designed to express the French soldier’s pride in his own unit of the service, or in his own branch of the service.”

Camaraderie equaled family. Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux noted this concept. It was a family where teasing occurred. In his autobiography, he noted, “…Like our soldiers, we were

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90 Ex-Trooper, 51.
91 Ibid., 52-3.
92 Ibid., 59.
still at the point where you tease a comrade by putting his cap on the freshest grave in the
cemetery.” 93 Writing about his unit, Pierre de Mazenod noted the gelling of his comrades: “It
was born of the activity of everybody, it would continue to perfect itself in action, to instruct
itself under fire. But already, it was a force to reckon with. It departed full of faith in victory,
passionate, proud of contributing to the grand task ahead, resolved to strike with all its might.” 94
During the march to the front, Christian Mallet felt the connection of camaraderie as he wrote,
“…yet in spite of myself, I watched them, these comrades of mine, day in, day out, to whom I
should become more closely allied still by war, and tried to pierce the mists of the future, grey
and threatening, and to discern what was to be the fate of each.” 95 J. Georges Scapini echoed this
attachment, describing the camaraderie of his regiment:

A regiment is a curious cross section of humanity; in fact, it affords the best education in
practical matters and in psychology that a boy can have. Every type is represented
there—sons of good families, workingmen, peasants, intellectuals and bullies, fine
fellows, scoundrels, fools, and people with intelligence. It is a remarkable field of study
for anyone who takes the trouble to observe one’s fellow creature. 96

This feeling of camaraderie grew for Scapini. After returning to the front near Rheims from a
wound he received earlier, he described those feelings, writing, “There I met some of my
comrades, and I listened eagerly to their stories of the events which had occurred since my
departure. Many of those whom I had known were dead or wounded or missing. I experienced a

93 Giraudoux, 7.

94 Pierre de Mazenod, Dans les Champs de Meuse: souvenirs d’un commandand de
batterie (1914), (Paris: Plon, 1921), 20, as cited in Leonard V. Smith, The Embattle Self:
French Soldiers’ Testimony of the Great War, (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press,
2007), 29.

95 Mallet, 17-8.

96 Scapini, 36.
strange sensation when I heard this news.”

He felt at home with his pseudo-family, and they acted how families sometimes act:

I found my friends Rigaud, Ricois, Demmet, and others. I dropped into their midst while they were absorbed in a most animated discussion of an article that had appeared in *Le Matin*. It was an article by M. Charles Humbert, a senator, who demanded, with words that echoed all over France, cannon and ammunition to fill the cannon.

“Yes,” screamed Rigaud, “that bunch of fools never even thought of that. No cannon! It isn’t surprising that the Fritzes have pushed us as far as they have.”

Ricois, quiet and conciliatory, replied, “Don’t worry, they have written us everywhere that they’ll be with us Christmas. That means more than three months to wait.”

At that moment they saw me. “Hold! Here’s Scapini!” They all treated me like a child of Fortune, slapping me on the shoulder and punching me in the ribs.

“Look at this pilgrim,” said Ricois affectionately, “he’s superb! Clean! Fat! Rosy! Come now, tell us the news. The folks back there aren’t too badly off, are they?”

Christian Mallet, reflecting on his comrades, wrote tenderly about his lost mates, “…too many to name here, but of all of whom I cherish in my heart a recollection not only tender but full of pride that they were my friends.”

He also described a moving experience shortly after the Battle of the Marne, where he saw a priest overseeing a funeral service to two chasseurs,

…who had fallen nobly while defending the bridge over the river. All around, kneeling in the mud of the porch, a semicircle of bareheaded soldiers, overcome by gratitude and humility, were assembled to accomplish a last duty and pay their last respects to the two comrades who were lying before them and who were sleeping their last sleep in their blood-stained uniforms, and assisted at the supreme office. The priest finished the *De profundis*, and in a clear voice pronounced the sacred words “*Vertitur in terram suam unde erat et spiritus redit ad Deum qui dedit illum.*” The officiant gave the holy-water sprinkler to the priest, who sprinkled the bodies and murmured “*Requiescat in pace.*” “Amen,” responded the kneeling crowd, and a great wave of religious feeling passed over the kneeling men, the greater part of whom gave way to overmastering emotion.

I can still see a big devil of an artilleryman, with his head between his hands, shaken by convulsive sobs. Having given the absolution, the priest raised the host

97 Ibid., 66.

98 Ibid., 67-8.

sparkling in the sunlight for the last time and pronounced the sacramental words. I moved off, deeply affected by the grandeur of the scene. 100

Giraudoux saw a fellow combatant feign death to stay with wounded comrade at the Marne. 101

During the combat, Giraudoux noted the existence and effectiveness of camaraderie.

Midnight. We have buried ourselves in a pit, and those not on duty are joining us. Here comes the captain, the man of all men whom we are least eager to see, for he snores. As we lie all in a heap, our legs pinned down by heavy legs, unknown arms—we prefer not to know those—embrace us. No and again one defends one’s head stubbornly against a knee, a shoe, another head. Sometimes a newcomer, not knowing that weapons have been laid aside, drops down on us with his rifle. Violent and anonymous kicks are launched against an unfortunate leg which turns out to be the captain’s. A soldier down at the bottom shivers, giving the living mass a feverish motion; two late-coming guests, generously spread their cloaks over the whole crowded pit. An officer, on his rounds, orders us to get up; we answer not a word; whereupon he threatens us, so that our captain must needs stick out his head and command us, like our consciences, not to stir from our position. …

From all four corners of the plateau the machine guns are rattling like dead men’s bones…. One of the soldiers at the bottom of our heap tries to free himself; the others make themselves heavier, to keep him quiet. He keeps moving convulsively, until, the resistance crushed out of him, he gives up. 102

Giraudoux continued on the matter:

Friendship keeps us close together, and each one leans on a comrade, but we have developed an unspeakable obstinacy. No one yields an inch to any one else. Dollero tries to make me eat the bread he has left.

“Eat this bread.”

“Keep it yourself.”

“You won’t, won’t you? Well, look!”

He throws it away; and God alone knows what bread meant to us that night.

“Throw it away. I don’t care.”

Then he sees that the rheumatism in my shoulder is not improving, and insists on carrying my rifle. We struggle. He hurts me. I hurt him still more, it seems, for I can see the tears in his eyes. 103

100 Ibid., 81.

101 Giraudoux, 176. This was not the sort of camaraderie for which military leaders hoped.

102 Ibid., 207-8.

103 Ibid.
Camaraderie had its limits, however. At least there were limits for Paul Lintier’s comrade. During an artillery barrage, Lintier dove into a ditch, where he noticed a terrible odor—a comrade had dug himself in and defecated on himself! The comrade then said, “Don’t even think about it, buddy! I’m the one in the s[hit], but I wouldn’t give you my place for twenty francs.”

The Experience of Fire

“Baptism of fire” provided a good measuring stick in understanding the true psyche of soldiers. For some French soldiers, the quest for fire was as nerve-wracking as the fire itself. J. Georges Scapini, while moving toward the Ardennes, remembered feeling that way:

We had been informed that some Uhlans had been seen not far from the place where we arrived. Orders are shouted, steel is polished, guns are loaded, ready for any emergency. A tremor of excitement runs through the regiment.

We would scan the horizon and examine the openings in the woods and the entrances of villages, expecting every instant to discover an enemy whom we burned with desire to attack. Our hopes were disappointed. Nothing happened…. After several hours of marching, the tension of our feelings lessened. On the other hand, the heat increased, and the sun beat down upon us so mercilessly that we forgot the Germans, thinking only of our misery.

Scapini’s regiment continued for over a week with no action, but the Germans were moving closer at the Sambre River:

For the first time since my departure from Dieppe I sensed clearly that the situation was serious, and that there was indeed to be a fight. The bullets which, for drilling purposes, I slipped into my gun to fire at shadows in the wood would now be used with men as targets! When one is twenty, one has a very vague idea of realities, one must have actual contact with them in order to understand them completely.

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104 Lintier, *Avec une batterie de 75, Ma Pièce*, 81, as cited in Smith, *The Embattle Self*, 38.

105 Scapini, 51-2.

106 Ibid., 54.
The wait continued: “All day we waited anxiously. Waiting is very fatiguing, especially in time of danger. It produces discomfort which gradually becomes agonizing, and which contracts the throat.”107 That day went with no Germans in sight, but by nighttime, Belgian peasants appeared, shouting, “The Germans! the Germans!” they cried with unspeakable anguish in their eyes.”108 The anticipated trial by fire for J. Georges Scapini soon began:

That was a slight excitement—a passing emotion, then silence as of death. In the distance, between the trees, moved dim gray shadows. It was the Germans. They advanced man by man, concealing themselves behind tree trunks. “Fire at will upon the enemy—they are advancing!” The air was rent asunder—that was the voice of our guns. Over there the gray shadows seemed to melt away, but in a few minutes there was a response—two or three discharges of artillery showered upon us abundantly. It is a queer sound when heard for the first time—the noise of bullets flying over one’s head or striking the ground with a soft plouf.

Suddenly I heard a death rattle at my side and turned round. Poor Chapuis, there he lay with a bullet right through his head! He was the first to fall, and his death was the first I had ever seen in my life. A horrible agony contracted my throat—how could I help it! That was war! Yesterday he was so full of life, such a gay comrade, such a good fellow; to-day there was nothing left of him, only a pitiful blue and red object, a face bathed in blood! What horror! I then realized all the abomination of war, and I was almost ashamed of myself for having thought there could be glory in it. I have taken part since in a number of skirmishes and battles, I have seen many dreadful things; but I have never felt anything with more poignant emotion than my first contact with the realities of war and death.109

With a renewed German attack, Scapini and his comrades were “obliged to beat a retreat;” then, “Things began to go badly. Our retreat lasted part of the night.”110 The next day fared little better for Scapini and his comrades, where his regiment was sent to occupy a wood of Bouffioux and stop the Germans: “We occupied the wood, but we did not stop them at all. Besides, we

107 Ibid., 55-6. See Chapter One for the physiological effects of combat.

108 Ibid., 56.

109 Ibid., 56-8.

110 Ibid., 58.
learned afterward from experience that men should never be run out of the trenches to attack, since the human body has less resistance than the bullet which penetrates it.”

Events unfolded worse over the next few days, especially for Scapini at Guise, where

…a great battle ensued which resembled a picture drawn by Detaille—the Germans on one side, the French on the other. We even saw the cannon. We gained the upper hand, but I was not benefited thereby. A bursting shell—a leap in the air—a sharp pain in my thigh—a 77 shrapnel had done me honor by exploding close to me. I was covered with blood. I picked myself up with considerable difficulty, not know exactly what had happened, and went limping toward an ambulance.

Scapini received a wound, but he would return to fight for France.

In his autobiography, Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux described his baptism by fire.

Marching forward into Alsace, he received it. He described the process of marching forward to battle and finding the enemy:

We are beginning to be tired of fighting all by ourselves. Impossible to root out a German. In the trenches at Saint-Cosme and Bretten there are no signs of anything but *Gemütlichkeit*,--of the Baden, or Munich, or Saxon variety according to the regiment,--a harmonica, some verses from Goethe printed across a bunch of violets at the bottom of a post-card; just such a pacific collection as one finds in the Maillot subway on race-nights. No helmets, no sabers, but a valise and a catalogue of electric apparatus. On some dressings that have been thrown away a few drops of pale blood—the blood of a hospital patient, the blood of a race that remains civilian under arms, whose life, and hunger, and thirst are not purified by war. Already I feel the injustice of making soldiers fight against this mass of civilians. A useless war, it seems, where, under the name of Blue Light Horse, and White Hussars,--but always in the same greenish coat,--we shall capture waiters, and painters from Dresden with square eyeballs, who are doubtless already cutting their French sentinel into cubes.

Giraudoux, somewhat arrogantly, continued forward, forgetting the idea that virtually the entire French army consisted of civilians at the outbreak as well. While going forward, he saw some

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111 Ibid., 59.

112 Ibid., 60-1.

German corpses “who could not live without breathing. The rest of them have had time to change their nationality in the cellars and barns of the villages.”\textsuperscript{114} His ridicule and wit proved enlightening as he wrote, “We are like a mob of actors on whom the curtain has risen one minute too soon; we suddenly realize that we none of us know our places in the fray.”\textsuperscript{115} He conceded that the French army “is so poor at getting the points of the compass….\textsuperscript{116} In the area of Alsace on 19 August, the theater lobby lights clicked, and Giraudoux and his comrades prepared themselves:

> It is our first battle, and we are beginning to block out the thoughts and gestures that we shall have, once we are fighters. We don’t yet shake hands with each other, but our glances are so heavy that if they fall upon a neighbor’s indifferent eyes, he has, perforce, to smile at us. We don’t make our wills, but the soldiers who owed each other small sums pay them back, or cancel the debt. Only one man in the company sets down his last wishes: this is Lâtre, who leaves his business to his wife, and his wife to his father. We jokingly hand the paper about, and Lâtre follows it from squad to squad, as if to guard a precious heritage of his own.\textsuperscript{117}

In the dark on the eve of battle, some of the men demonstrates courage, or idiocy—sometimes there is a fine line, “The fellows whose first chance it is to show what stuff they are made of are lighting their cigarettes more tenderly than usual.”\textsuperscript{118} Bravado amongst the soldiers was present. The baptism neared for Giraudoux and his comrades.

> All at once our ignorance of war weighs us down, as if this were the night before an examination. We are almost ready to go over military theory again, and feel guilty to have neglected our halting, and our deployments. But chiefly, without respite, we think of the first wounded and the first dead of the battalion. All the mental power we have

\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 9.

\textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 14,

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 17-8.

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 18-9.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 19.
stumbles sharply over this first corpse. We understand the second, and the third, and toward the hundredth we ourselves stretch our stark length on the ground; but suddenly, in spite of us, the first dead whom we have finally laid out in our minds comes back to life, scrambles to his feet, and the whole thing has to be done over again. When a soldier who is setting a match to his pipe lights up his face for an instant, we tremble for him as if he were flashing a signal to death. Our shoulders slump; age comes upon us. Restlessly we wander up and down in this darkness which makes victory seem scarcely more desirable than morning. “C’est toi?” “Yes, it’s I,” comes the tremulous answer, out of a deep courage….  

What happened next was anyone’s guess, and Giraudoux does not share the event. Whatever happened, it was not flattering. Giraudoux wrote, “…Now comes an hour which does not belong to the regiment, and which Captain Lambert has made us erase form our journals. Wounded and dead are what we find here.” Obviously, things did not go well for the French soldiers. Bravado turned into humility. Yet, Giraudoux and his comrades marched forward. They went from the Loire into German land, taking Bernwiller and Enschingen by the end of 20 August, and found themselves in Alsace eating breakfast. After an ordered retreat, Giraudoux and his regiment find themselves at the Marne on 5 September, where he lost his first comrade and wrote, “A man killed…My war is over.” But, it was not. The Battle of the Marne ensued, and Giraudoux described his experience on 7 September; 

All is quiet again. This is the hour when the first lines on both sides, worn out, form the only neutral zone in all the two countries and do no more than mount guard before the battle. Our second lines may snipe at the German second line; our cannons may blaze away at their howitzers, our civilians may hate their civilians: we shall not shoot. We

119 Ibid., 19-20.

120 Ibid., 25. Italicized for added emphasis.

121 This was part of the original Schlieffen plan where the German left flank would “invite” the French right flank into Alsace-Lorraine.

122 Giraudoux, 21-8.

123 Ibid., 152.
reserve our wrath, rather, for a company of our own reinforcements, fifty yards back of
us, which insists on taking us for wounded. The captain, greatly excited, shouts that he is
coming to deliver us, and also keeps yelling, “Vorwärts! Vorwärts!” to stir up the
Germans. Mourlin, to calm them, yells still louder a German word which he wrongly
believes to mean, “Quiet!” The two voices battle for the mastery, while the Saxons,
fearing some trick, lie still before us, wondering what the French can be getting ready to
do when they bellow forth in the Imperial language, “Peace! Peace!”

Taunting and humorous trickery continued.

Every now and then Jalicot shouts, “Surrender!” to tease the Germans, who are unable to
see the joke and reply, “No, no!” in throaty French, so that there will be no possible
mistake. Then, in their turn, they call on us to surrender, and we reply, in chorus, with
one single word. They are annoyed; did they not answer us politely?

By the end of the Marne, as with other accounts, the French soldiers received a boost of moral.

Giraudoux penned such that, “The day has gone well. We were all happy and clear-headed. We
have fought a good battle, just as we should have turned a good bargain or set a good table, in
civil life, according to our respective trades.” He also showed little sympathy for the enemy:
“As we lie here close by the corpses of those soldiers from Nassau who tried to bar our way
yesterday evening, we think of to-morrow, when we shall spread a Saxon carpet over the
earth.”

Captain Ferdinand Belmont knew all too well the importance of a soldier’s baptism by
fire. In a letter dated 12 August from Macot, he opined:

It is the first contact which must be the critical moment. Once that step has been
taken, one ought to progress much better, be another man, an insensible thing hurled by a
sort of unconscious force, impossible to define, which has suddenly arisen from the

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124 Ibid., 203.
125 Ibid., 206.
126 Ibid., 216.
127 Ibid.
unknown depths of self, and which guides the subjugated machine until the moment it stops, triumphant or shattered.128

He started encountering the results of fire, writing on 25 August, “The marching past of the retreating 22nd continues. All the men are hideous, hirsute, and visibly worn out. They have been fighting for three weeks, and have more often slept in the open air than on hay. However, notwithstanding their fatigue, they are more cheerful and courageous.”129 On the eve of battle, the men were ready, and according to Belmont, “Gallic blood will come out.”130

The moment for “Gallic blood” to appear came sooner rather than later. “This time we have received our baptism of fire—and a serious one, I assure you,” wrote Belmont in a 28 August letter. After cutting his letter short, he proceeded to describe the action the following day, stating,

I should like to resume my letter at the point I left off, but I am worn out and famished. We have had no distribution during the four days we have been in action. The battalion is broken up, and has partly disappeared; all the men are at the end of their strength, and have hardly been able either to sleep, or to rest, or to eat for the last three days. And in addition to that we are beaten: Saint-Dié is occupied by the Germans…. So, dog-tired, we are retreating, followed by infernal artillery fire, which has claimed not a few victims since yesterday.131

He wrote about Captain Rousse, who “… under my very eyes, met a uselessly heroic death.”132

In a 30 August letter, Belmont went on, describing the tragic death:

I was telling you, then, that, last Thursday, our first fight took place in the morning. Two sections of Captain Rousse’s company entered the pine wood, one on

128 Belmont, 46.
129 Ibid., 65.
130 Ibid., 66.
131 Ibid., 68.
132 Ibid.
each side of the road, immediately supported by two other sections including my own. Hardly had the first scouts entered the forest when a furious rifle-firing began, accompanied by cries and savage calls. The captain, who was preceding me, ordered me to advance my section quickly, in the direction which he indicated. But the firing redoubled, came from all sides at the same time, and men began to fall heavily, noiselessly, on to mossy ground. Then the captain, pale and very agitated, stood up in the wood and shouted at the top of his voice: “Help! Help! With fixed bayonets!” And immediately, at his first movement to dash forward, he fell backwards.

At that moment I was trying to see the Germans, who were shooting us almost point-blank, and who were invisible, thanks to their grayish uniforms mingling with the wild-raspberry bushes and ferns.

Meanwhile men were falling. Seizing the rifle of one who had fallen by my side, I fired a few shots, whilst sheltering myself as well as possible behind a pine tree or a clod. But very quickly, on looking around me, I saw that there was hardly any one else standing…

Then, rather than get killed all by myself, which would doubtless have been more heroic, I fled towards the houses of Dijon, jumped over the barricades and, amidst a continuous whizz of bullets, took refuge in a house.133

After a shell fell on the roof, Belmont asked, “What was one to do alone? In my turn I fled, as best I could, hearing, for four or five hundred metres, the bullets hissing like serpents everywhere, whilst tracing lines in the grass.”134 He fled to Alpine battery and machine gun location.

Belmont and his small battalion, as there were “Only fragments of the 51st Battalion…” remaining, received an order to hold the valley, “in advance of the ways of retreat, at all cost…”135 They were driven back by German patrols, causing Belmont some anguish, and he ended his 30 August letter, writing, “Farewell! War is indeed horrible, and there are times, like this evening, when, in spite of oneself, one is overcome by hideous depression.”136 His anguish

133 Ibid., 69-70.
134 Ibid., 71.
135 Ibid., 73.
136 Ibid., 73, 76.
showed no signs of lessening, especially when facing German artillery, as he noted in his letter dated 3 September:

Since this morning everything has been confined to an artillery duel. The quantity of artillery ammunition consumed by the Germans is incredible. Whatever may have been said, their famous heavy artillery is not negligible—one must recognize that after having seen a few of these huge craters it sinks in the fields, with a stupendous eruption of earth and iron, or else the breaches it makes in brick walls or roof. But, above all, they can fire from a great distance (8 to 9 kilometres) with these big guns, which is at once their strength and weakness; for if they are able to bombard as from far off they are aiming somewhat in the dark, so much so that in the end they do not do great harm, considering the inordinate quantity of projectiles they fire. The tiny bullets which strike you slyly, without you hearing them coming, are more to be feared.\textsuperscript{137}

Still, Belmont survived, exclaiming in a 6 September letter, “One marvels, on finding oneself still alive, to perceive that one has lived up to the present time.”\textsuperscript{138} His trial by fire ended, but the fire still burned.

And sometimes, war provided unexpected enemies. Belmont noted one such adversary in a 6 September letter:

A little incident occurred at Gironpaire. We were attacked and charged—by a cow, a wild young heifer which rushed at us from behind the end of a hedge. Ahead of the others, I was the first to be bowled over, and the animal charged me twice, with lowered head, and would certainly have injured me if it had not, fortunately, been devoid of horns, owing to its youth. I got off with a fright….\textsuperscript{139}

The next day, the captain faced another adversary, writing, “You must go at full speed in warfare, and never before have I understood so well the literal truth of the expression ‘Avoir du cœur au ventre.’ For the stomach plays a great part.”\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 79-80.
\textsuperscript{138} Ibid., 80.
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid., 82.
\textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 83. “To have the heart in the stomach.”
When the tide turned for the French army, the moral boosted for Belmont and his comrades. “The men immediately regained courage, notwithstanding their ten consecutive nights at the outposts, on all of them bringing in trophies.” During the Aisne, Belmont, who recently made lieutenant, kept his faith, demonstrated in his 26 September letter:

“All goes well. The battle continues—the great battle. Perhaps the great victory. There has been fierce fighting to-day; and it will continue to-morrow. But courage! Confidence! The Germans suffer and lose more men than we do. This is the time to put one’s whole heart into the work. Vive la France!”

The sound of French artillery helped in the effort of morale boosting, as described in Belmont’s 27 September letter:

Here, our artillery, which was somewhat muzzled and placed at a disadvantage in the mountainous region of the Vosges, recovers its full value, and amidst these vast expanses, with low horizons, it shoots with certainty and efficiency.—What a splendid instrument our glorious 75 gun is! And how we little chasseurs and foot-soldiers love to hear behind us its fine big voice, encouraging us and urging us on to the attack! One feels full of confidence on hearing its sonorous rumbling; and on distinguishing, in the formidable symphony of the battlefield, the clear tone of its vibrating notes, one has the same pleasure as the sportsman who recognizes the purebred dog by his baying when on the track. How inelegant and “mongrel” the wretched little 77 of the Germans or their big clumsy howitzers are in comparison! They harm us all the same, and yesterday, in the 11th, we had not a few wounded, including three officers.

Still, fatalism and piety presented themselves from time to time: “We live from day to day. His will be done!”

Christian Mallet was another soldier who awaited his baptism by fire, but the fog of war delayed that event. In writing on 22 August in his diary, “We do not understand the movements

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141 Ibid., 85.
142 Ibid., 94.
143 Ibid., 94.
144 Ibid., 90.
we are carrying out. *Are we retreating?* The fatigue is becoming insupportable.” Mallet wrote, “We were ignorant of the movements going on, and we were amazed and quite out of our reckoning, hardly daring to believe that the enemy, who the evening before was thought to be at the gates of Paris, was now in retreat.” Finally, the day of reckoning was at hand, and it occurred at the Marne:

Above the village of Troène we fell into the thick of the fight. This happened so quickly that I preserve only a visual image of it. We had slowly climbed a hill, whose shadow concealed the setting sun from us. As we came out on the crest of the hill, we caught a sudden glimpse of a regiment of chasseurs-à-chevel, silhouetted in black against the immense red screen of the sky, charging like a whirlwind, with drawn sabres.

A “75” gun on our flank fired without interruption. I can see now a wounded chasseur who rose from the grass where he lay almost under the muzzle of the gun, and who fell back, as if struck by lightning, from the displacement of air caused by the shell. A second later nothing was to be seen except a confused mêlée behind a small wood. The noise was terrible, and was made up of a thousand different sounds. An officer of chasseurs, with a bullet through his chest, bareheaded, all splashed with blood, came down the hill leaning on his sword, and leaving behind him a long trail which reddened the grass. Then the sun seemed to perish as the immense uproar died down; all the noises died away, and we continued our road in the rapidly falling darkness, having had a sudden and fugitive vision of one scene amongst the thousands which compose the drama of a great battle.

Mallet’s experience at the Marne continued, as he wrote,

From the 8th we began to play an active part in the great battle. The 5th Cavalry Division was ordered to surprise a German convoy and to seize it. The officers told us of this mission. At last we were going to do something; our time of waiting was at an end, and there was to be no more wandering about the burnt-up country, devoured by thirst and discouraged at feeling ourselves lost and forgotten in the great struggle we had set our hand to. The convoy would be four kilomètres long, and we could already imagine the attack, the taking of booty. It was going to be a romantic and amusing episode, and the dragoons sat up in their saddles, forgetting their fatigue and their hunger, and full of joy at the thought of the promised combat.

145 Mallet, 40.

146 Ibid., 43.

147 Ibid., 45-6.
In my inner self I could not share the general enthusiasm.\textsuperscript{148}

The enthusiasm for battle deteriorated further for Mallet, as he noted an issue with moving the machine guns:

The soft soil sunk in like a marsh. Then there was a sudden halt and, quite near me, I saw the Major’s face, full of anxiety. Addressing Captain de Tarragon in a choking voice he said, “The machine-guns are done for.” The rest of the phrase was lost, but I heard the words “bogged, engulfed, impossible to get them out….”

We were ordered to incline, and we climbed up again to the forest. All the men were alarmed at the loss of the machine-guns, abandoned in the marsh, and the face of Desoil, the non-commissioned officer with the machine-guns [sic], was heart-breaking. His mouth worked but no words came.\textsuperscript{149}

The lack of food worsened matters.

With this discouragement all of us felt a renewal of hunger which was painfully acute. Thirst too burnt our throats, and fatigue weighed down our exhausted limbs. Ah, how I envied the horses which nibbled the leaves and the grass. For two days our water-bottles had been empty, we had already finished our reserve rations and this contributed to the gloom on our faces.\textsuperscript{150}

Mallet and his comrades pushed on Bonneuil-en-Valois, where they rested, only they were not the only troops in the neighborhood.

A small post composed of a corporal and four men was the only guard for our bivouac. Each of us had passed his horse’s reins under his arm, and all of us slept, officers and men alike, like tired brutes. We did not suspect that our sentinels were posted hardly three hundred mètres from the German sentries, who were concealed from us by a fold in the ground which held a regiment of Prussian infantry, who had chanced to get there, within rifle range, just at the same time as we.

At dawn a neighing horse, some class of arms, probably gave away our position, and the alarm was given in the enemy’s camp, which was separated from us only by a field of standing lucerne. The troopers slept on, and the German scouts crept up, absolutely invisible.

A sudden musketry fire woke us up, and the German infantry was on us. I cannot think of these moments without giving credit to the admirable presence of mind which

\textsuperscript{148} Ibid., 47.

\textsuperscript{149} Ibid., 50-1.

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid., 51.
saved the situation by the avoidance of all panic. The horses were not girthed up, many of the kits had slipped round, reins were unbuckled; no matter, we had to mount. I have a crazy recollection of my loose girth, of my saddle slipping round, of the blanket which had worked forward on to my horse’s neck; no matter, “Forward! Forward!” a second’s delay might be our ruin. A hail of bullets fell amongst us. Alongside of me, Alaire, a quite young non-commissioned officer, was hit in the belly. He was the first in the regiment whom I had seen fall. God! what a horrible toss he took, dragged by his horse, maddened by fear, crying out, “Rolland, Rolland, don’t abandon me.” Then, in a last contortion, his food came out of the stirrup and he died convulsed by a final spasm. Near me, the Captain’s orderly gave a loud shout; horses, mortally wounded, galloped wildly for some mètres and then suddenly fell as if pole-axed.

I saw a man who, as if seized with madness, sent his wounded horse headlong to the bottom of a ravine and then threw himself after.

“Forward! Forward!” I followed the others, who made off towards the village. My horse trod on a German whose throat, gashed by a lance thrust, poured out such a stream of blood that the earth under me was red and streaming with it. “Forward! Forward!”

Mallet and his comrades escaped the village, but, as he noted, “We trotted into the village with our heads down, humiliated at having been fooled like children.” He did, however, take one bit of pleasure: “I can still recall the sight of an isolated German, caught between the fire of his regiment and the charge of our horses. I turned my head and laughed with joy at seeing a comrade pierce him with his lance in passing.” Was this an aspect of French nationalism, or was it a fit of sadism brought on by depression?

Despite the situation, morale remained high for Mallet and his comrades, as he noted, “In spite of everything the men’s spirits remained admirable. All had a jest on their lips, and the more serious amongst them wrote a line to their wives or mothers.”

151 Ibid., 51-3.
152 Ibid., 54.
153 Ibid.
154 Ibid., 56.
An interesting part of Mallet’s story involved an apparent hesitancy to shoot the enemy.

While still trying to escape the Germans,

…two officers of Uhlans appeared on a little road which, so to speak, hung above us. At once all eyes were fixed on these two thin silhouettes. They advanced, talking quietly, with their reins loose on their horses’ necks. How great was the temptation to shoulder one’s carbine, take steady aim, feel one’s man at the end of the muzzle and kill him dead with a ball through the heart! Everyone understood, however, that it was necessary to keep quiet and let off the prey so good a mark was it, for doing so would have given the alarm and signalised our presence.  

The Uhlans (one possibly a Prussian officer) soon realized the French were there:

Then in a flash they understood and fled at full speed. For an instant we heard the stones fly under their horses’ shoes, but the sound grew fainter and fainter, and a deep silence reigned again.

The alarm had been given.

Mallet and his comrades had to flee.

The game of cat-and-mouse continued. Mallet began to lose hope, writing, “For a moment it seemed as if we were at some monstrous hunt on horseback with men for quarry, and in spite of myself, a mortal fatigue seized on me. I shut my eyes and waited for the “Gone away.” Better it were to be finished quickly, since the game was lost.”

Thinking that capture or death seemed imminent, he took action, noting,

Almost timidly, so absurd did the idea appear that one of us could escape, I asked him to write a line home if it were my luck to be done for and if he came out safe. I promised him the same service, if the roles were reversed. To such an extent does gaiety enter into the composition of our French nature, we even joked for a few moments and we shared a last tablet of chocolate, which he had preserved in his wallets, a service for which I shall always be grateful to him…

155 Ibid.

156 Ibid., 57.

157 Ibid., 58.

158 Ibid., 58-9.
While still surrounded by Germans, a change of heart occurred for him and his comrades, and Mallet wrote, “From this moment a vague hope sprang up in our hearts and, as is often the case, we gathered courage when the worst of catastrophes seemed to be heaping on our heads.”\(^{159}\) After regrouping their morale, they continued:

While crossing a road a sudden noise and a cry of “Help!” rang out, a cry choked with agony and terror. It came from one of our men, whose horse had struck into mine and had rolled into the ditch. I turned and saw in a flash a brief struggle which the night at once blotted out. This time I had made no mistake. There really were two Germans struggling with our comrade; but I was carried on by the forward movement, and profound silence reigned again.\(^{160}\)

The question was whether or not Mallet could have saved his comrade. Mallet chose not to try.\(^{161}\) It was indeed dark times for Mallet and the French soldiers, and he noted, “During this time I lived the worst hours of my life.”\(^{162}\) Sadly, the worst hours were not over:

At that moment when our agony was at an end, when hope revived, when, even, certain men giving way to fatigue had bent down on to their wallets drunk with sleep,—at that moment we fell definitely into the mousetrap into which the Germans had methodically decoyed us, and a desperate attack was made on us from all sides. The drama took place so rapidly that I can remember only detached shreds of it. The clouds parted, letting fall a flood of moonlight; somewhere a cry resounded in the night, and the black forest seemed to spit fire. Thousands of brief flashes lit up each thicket, a hail of bullets thinned the column, and mingled with this were cries and a terrible neighing from the horses, some of which reared, while others lay kicking on the ground, dragging their riders and their kits in a spasm of terrible agony. Instinctively each trooper made a “left turn” and galloped furiously to get out of range of this murderous fire which decimated our ranks. In a few seconds we had put two hundred mètres between the forest and us, and the two squadrons rallied under cover of a slight mist.

\(^{159}\) Ibid., 61.

\(^{160}\) Ibid., 62.

\(^{161}\) Mallet was no coward. An opportunity for a heroic action to save a comrade presented itself, and Mallet did not act. Obviously, the ordeal of Mallet and his men contributed to this. Regardless, Mallet later proved himself.

\(^{162}\) Mallet, 62.
As we rode a squadron sergeant-major, Dangel, gave a groan, as his horse cried him off after the others. Then I saw him collapse, pitch forward on his nose on to his horse’s for shoulder and fall to the ground, to be dragged. I leapt from my horse and managed to disengage his foot. Holding him in my arms, I begged him to show a little pluck. “We must clear out of this or we will be taken prisoners. For God’s sake get on your horse.” His only response was a long sigh, then his heavy body collapsed in my arms, and he dragged me to the ground. For a second I was perplexed. The others were far off, and I alone remained behind with a dying man in my arms, who clasped me in desperate embrace. At last his arms let go, and a spasm stretched him dead at my feet. I laid him piously on the grass with his face to the sky, and when I had finished this last duty to a comrade, I raised my head and saw a whole line of skirmishers fifty mètres off. For a moment a feeling possessed me that I could not get away; but, damme [sic], they were not going to take me alive. An extraordinary calm came over me.

I remounted slowly, made sure that I had picked up all four reins and lowered my lance. Now, by the grace of God…now for it.”

Mallet lived to fight another day—he in fact escaped!

Mallet and his men found themselves again in danger of being discovered. They neared the enemy’s bivouac:

A stupid sentry was warming himself, and had his back turned to us. What was the good of struggling? Why cheat oneself with chimerical illusions? The day would dawn and we would be ingloriously surprised and sent to some prisoner’s camp in the centre of Germany, unless, choosing to die rather than yield, we kept for ourselves the last shot in our magazines.

Mallet and his comrades moved on, without attacking the sentry. To avoid detection, this was probably the appropriate course of action.

After spending the last several days trapped behind German lines, the “worst hours” of Mallet’s life came to an end. He saw the French army!

I turned my reeling head towards my comrades and I fell on the grass crying, crying like a madman, in words without sequence. The fatigue of these five days without food or drink, almost without sleep, and the living in a perpetual nightmare, brought on a nervous crisis, and my whole body was racked with spasms. My comrades, not having as yet understood, looked at me with astonishment. With a gesture I pointed out the

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163 Ibid., 63-5.

164 Ibid., 69.
approaching column, the pale blue of which contrasted brightly with the gold of the leaves. All of them, as soon as they had seen it, were overcome as I had been, each in his own way. Some burst into brusque convulsive sobs, others danced, waving their arms like madmen or rather like poor wretches who have passed days of suffering and agony on a raft in mid-ocean, and who suddenly see a ship approaching to their rescue.  

Mallet and his remaining comrades escaped the ordeal. Those were dark hours indeed, not just for Mallet, but for France. But in the darkest hour, Mallet pulled through, just like France. His ordeal occurred during the Battle of the Marne. Mallet received a recommendation for the military medal, and he soon received a promotion to corporal, when he obtained his red flannel chevrons.  

Reactor

The ordeal of combat tested the French soldiers and produced their true mindset. Disillusionment occurred for some, but the majority maintained their devotion to the nation of France. Actions of courage and attachments to their comrades were reoccurring themes. J. Georges Scapini, after his return to the front from his wound, was a bit hesitant discussing the conflict, writing, “There is hardly anything of interest to relate concerning life in the trenches. I shall not mention all the attacks in which I took part.” For he and his comrades, he continued, writing, “We waited for peace, but peace never came.” Nevertheless, he shared one experience at Ferme du Choléra worth noting as he gazed over the dead bodies lying in what would later be known as no-man’s-land: “Between the lines lay scattered hundreds of dead men;

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165 Ibid., 72-3.
166 Ibid., 87.
167 Scapini, 68.
168 Ibid.
there was no telling how long they had been there. It was hard to tell the Germans and the French apart. Rain, sun, and mud had left on them all a gray hue. All day long that horror was before our very eyes.”169 The macabre of death was terrifying, and it took courage to face the images the war created. Christian Mallet described one such image:

We billeted at Parvillers in a half-destroyed farm, and there at daybreak a sight that suggested an hallucination met our eyes. Some ten German soldiers were there in the courtyard dead, mowed down by the “75,” but in such natural attitudes that but for their waxen colour one could have believed them alive. One was standing holding on to a bush, his hand grasping the branches. His face bespoke his terror, his mute mouth seemed as if in the act of yelling and his eyes were dilated with fear. A fragment of shell had pierced his chest. Another was on his knees, propped against a wall, under cover of which he had sought shelter from the murderous fire. I approached to see where his wound was and it took me a moment to discover it, so intact was the corpse. I saw at last that he had had the whole of the inside of his cranium carried away and hollowed out, as if by some surgical instrument. His tongue and his eyes were kept in place by a filament of flesh, and his spiked helmet had rolled off by his side. An officer was seated on some hay, with his legs apart and his head thrown back, looking at the farm.

All these eyes fixed us with a terrifying immobility, with a look of such acute terror that our men turned away, as if afraid of sharing it; and not one of them dared to touch the magnificent new equipment of the Germans, which would have tempted them in any other circumstances. There were aluminum water-bottles and mess tins, helmet plates of shining copper and sculptured regimental badges dear to the hearts of soldiers, and which they have the habit of collecting as trophies.170

Courage proved to be a common theme. Scapini noted an act of heroism after a German attack caused a French withdrawal: “One of my friends, Lévêque, chief adjutant, carried on nobly, in a hand-to-hand fight, so that we might not be outflanked. He was horribly wounded in his face. When I saw him I shivered and trembled—Lévêque was not killed, but he was blind.”171

The French trooper, Christian Mallet, observed French courage at Dinant on 15 August:

169 Ibid., 69.
171 Scapini, 69-70.
“They come from Dinant, where the French have fought like lions. Our artillery arrived too late, but they had the fine courage to charge the German guns with the bayonet.”\textsuperscript{172} He was also part of a greater example of French courage in mid-October. On October 19, he and his cavalry division received an order to delay the German army’s march “\textit{at all costs}.”\textsuperscript{173} Mallet was to find himself in another precarious position.

Under cover of some thin brushwood we opened fire on these regular formations, to show that we were there and not in the least impressed by these demonstrations of company and filed training. It was just like being on manoeuvres, and these awkward soldiers seemed rather ridiculous, gravely doing the goose-step, when so soon it would be a question of killing or being killed.

We must have got their range, for we noted through field-glasses a slight confusion in the enemy’s ranks, and instantaneously, the advancing infantry disappeared. They were still there, however, for their bullets, slipping over the ridge where we offered a good target, pitted the turf all round us, happily without wounding any one. The Germans have a remarkable faculty of making themselves scarce in the twinkling of an eye as soon as they have been seen by an enemy, like those insects which, at the least noise, blend with the grass on which they are perched.\textsuperscript{174}

After a German artillery barrage forced a withdrawal, Mallet and his comrades took a new position to delay the enemy.

Thousands of projectiles struck our fragile barricade or passed, whistling, over our heads. We fired straight in front of us into the dark night, without knowing what we aimed at, except that our fire was directed towards the place whence this murderous storm of shot and shell came.

Constantly the same question ran from man to man: “Have the infantry come up?” for we knew that our lives depended on their arrival. Our orders were: “You will prevent the Germans passing till you have been relieved.”

We had only a handful of troopers, two hundred perhaps, to check the onslaught of a formidable mass of infantry. Unless our infantry came to our aid we would be cut up to a man; but the enemy should have to pass over our bodies.

Overcome with fatigue, and in spite of the thunder all round us, I fell asleep, suddenly, heavily, dreamlessly, in a little ditch which ran by the roadside. I don’t know

\textsuperscript{172} Mallet, 37.

\textsuperscript{173} Ibid., 97.

\textsuperscript{174} Ibid., 98.
when I awoke. The noise of the combat was dominated by a clamour still louder and more penetrating: a part of the village of Staden was on fire. A horde of Germans dashed into it, yelling “Hourra!” A diabolical clamour rose to heaven, and yells and cries of bestial joy mounted with the thick smoke of the fires.

We learnt afterwards that they had charged empty barricades, a party of our men having evacuated the town an hour previously. A corporal of the 1st squadron, posted a little more to the left, told me he had had seen them 200 yards off defiling in quick step “silhouetted like devils” against the glare of the fire.

Still no infantry.

A torpor seized me and I fell back into the ditch, overcome by sleep, and slept again till almost daylight. From that moment events moved with great rapidity. It must have been seven o’clock when the infantry at last arrived, fifteen hours late.¹⁷⁵

Forced to retreat due to a German flanking maneuver, one of Mallet’s commanding officers (COs), Captain de Tarragon, demonstrated courage during this critical hour.¹⁷⁶ The author noted a fearless attribute of Captain de Tarragon, and how he seemed, “to defy the entire world with his tall well set-up figure of a handsome French soldier.”¹⁷⁷ While under heavy fire, the captain, “Instead of taking to the ditch which ran by the roadside, he crossed the field of fire. I followed him, without understanding, and Magrin did likewise.”¹⁷⁸ Mallet continued relating the story:

The Captain, who was at my side, stepped forward to put himself, at last, under shelter. Hardly had he taken a step before a bullet hit him, and I uttered a cry of rage on seeing him fall in a heap. Feigning to be wounded or dead, to deceive the enemy and cause the cessation of his fire, I fell also, and both of us rolled into the deep ditch.¹⁷⁹

Sadly, the captain was dead. Mallet and his comrades continued losing COs, and the situation grew even more dire.¹⁸⁰ In this setting, heroism appeared.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid., 100-2.
¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 102-5.
¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 103-4.
¹⁷⁸ Ibid., 104. Margin was a comrade of Mallet’s.
¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 104-5. Margin also feigned death to help Captain de Tarragon.
¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 106.
Lieutenant Desonney [a CO] was wounded and lay out a hundred mètres [sic] off. I heard the Colonel cry in aloud voice with an accent of despair which is untranslatable, “Won’t someone bring in Desonney?” and one after the other five dragoons unhesitatingly left their shelter and threw themselves into the furnace of fire, each of them as he fell, within a few yards, and to be immediately replaced by another. The whole regiment would have gone if the Colonel had not put a stop to such heroic obedience.

But what was going on? Amidst the noise of battle the clear notes of a bugle mounted to heaven; both sides hesitated. They were the well-known notes sound the charge. We turned, and a sight of unspeakable grandeur met our eyes.

The dismounted 1st squadron, lance in hand, charged into the whirlwind of fire, to allow of the rest of the regiment falling back. The obsessing refrain made one’s temples throb. We were hypnotised, and the Colonel, standing up, unconscious of the bullets which grazed him, folded his arms and watched his admirable soldiers who, moved by almost superhuman brotherly devotion, braved the fire and retarded for a moment the enemy’s march so as to permit their comrades to escape. The Colonel watched, and great tears of pride and of anxiety ran down his tanned cheeks. When, once in one’s life, one has had the privilege of seeing such a deed, it lives with one forever.\(^{181}\)

Mallet and his remaining comrades escaped, thanks to the heroic charge by the dismounted 1st squadron. As Mallet noted,

We had lost… many comrades, but we had made it possible for two army corps to come up.

A mere handful of men had put up a fight against three divisions. A fine page in the history of the regiment!

My greatcoat was handed round the squadron. A bullet had pierced the cloth four times under the heart, another twice through the arm, three others over the ribs.\(^{182}\)

For his service and due to the losses of COs, Christian Mallet received a promotion to sergeant-major.\(^{183}\)

Captain Ferdinand Belmont’s tale of courage went back to the commander he respected:

Captain Rousse. Before dying, Captain Rousse told two of his men who tried helping him,

\(^{181}\) Ibid., 106-7.

\(^{182}\) Ibid., 108.

\(^{183}\) Ibid., 109.
“‘Thank my company for me,’ and afterwards: ‘Take orders from Captain Deschamps.’”\textsuperscript{184} On the brink of death, Rousse still thought about his men.

For the editor of a work based on the memoirs of Captain Henri de Lécluse of the French army during World War I, courage and heroism played no small role in nationalism: “The cult of heroism is closely related to nationalism.”\textsuperscript{185} The French combatants who experienced their trial by fire swayed little in their following of French nationalism

Though J. Georges Scapini’s “baptism of fire” went badly, it did not sway his belief in France. He wrote,

\ldots my heart was overwhelmed with humiliation as I thought how powerless we were to prevent their invasion. Their invasion! The enemy in my country! In a few hours they would be there; that mighty, well-organized host would invade our villages, it would sweep along the road to Paris—Paris! Oh, the anguish we felt! Oh, the dark days we lived through! We no longer heeded our physical suffering, and all the time we were not eating at all, and slept little, but we were always on the march.\textsuperscript{186}

At the port city of Biarritz, in late August, early September, while still recovering from the wounds he suffered at Guise, he expanded further:

\begin{quote}
Biarritz—what a contrast!
There at the front was the army in retreat, artillery, terrific firing, death, desolation, and misery. Here was a colorful city, with pretty women in the streets, and many uniforms, but handsome uniforms, uniforms with mysterious and varied insignia, which plainly showed us folk of another order that the persons who wore them would never see a battle. If they did, it would be a pity. For a world of ingenuity and art had gone into the making of those uniforms. They were as subdued and soft in color as the uniforms of the front are conspicuous. This is a curious paradox.
I do not envy the people who take part in war quietly, from the rear. As a rule they are fine men, and it would be too bad if they were killed. Their conservation is
\end{quote}

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\textsuperscript{184} Belmont, 69.
\textsuperscript{185} Lécluse, 7. Captain Henri de Lécluse arrived to the front in 1915.
\textsuperscript{186} Scapini, 60.
\end{flushright}
essential to the future of the race. They must realize this, for their faces are grave, preoccupied, full of importance. 187

Captain Belmont, surviving his trial by fire as well as the confrontation with a bull, reflected on the goings of the war. In a 6 September letter, he described his thoughts:

How the war has devastated everything before us! A house—after many others—has finished burning at our feet. As far as the eye can reach there are nothing but ruins, shattered roofs, abandoned houses. Through my glasses I can distinguish in the distance a column of German infantry defiling along a narrow road. To think that those men marching over there, whom I can see in movement, advancing, and who are men like all of us, like myself, are enemies, and that, mutually watching each other from afar, we are anxious to kill each other some day or other—to-morrow, this evening, no matter when.

These appalling thoughts come to one sometimes when one reflects, especially during these clear evening hours when Nature, with her multitudinous voices, sings the hymn of peace, meditation, repose. No! No! We must thrust these egoistic temptations from us. We are at war and must wage war. It is a great and serious duty to be accepted and fulfilled. But pray for me…. May God protect you all! 188

French nationalism, with romantic traits, was not far from the captain’s mind. He shared this in a 9 September letter:

The other evening, at nightfall, whilst we were thus unceremoniously dining, all four conversing in an undertone, a sentry came to ask the lieutenant who commands us for the pass-word for the night. The lieutenant, after momentarily hesitating, replied: “Ma foi, the general hasn’t told me. Well, let it be m…!” And he uttered Cambronne’s heroic reply. Ah! old France! The stupid Germans will not so quickly destroy the heritage of our ancestors the Gauls; and I am quite certain that they over there, opposite us, do not know the art of replying, in articulo mortis, by means of such witticisms. 189

The ancestors of Gaul, indeed! Even after a major German assault that caused much loss of French life, Belmont, in a 28 September letter, maintained the influence of nationalism, writing,

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187 Ibid., 62-3. Biarritz was a resort city on the Bay of Biscay.

188 Belmont, 82.

189 Ibid., 84. Pierre Cambronne was a commander of the Old Guard, an elite force in Napoleon Bonaparte’s Imperial Army. After Napoleon’s loss at Waterloo, Cambronne was summoned to surrender his force. According to legend, he responded, “The Guard dies and does not surrender!”
“We shall soon have not a single one left. How many lives this war will have cost us! But we must retain hope in victory, whatever may be the price we pay for it. Great sacrifices strengthen and purify nations as they do individuals.”\textsuperscript{190}

Even during the transition to trench warfare, devotion to the nation remained. Captain Belmont noted the differences between the Germans and French, and a degree of arrogance appeared.

In certain trenches, where the irrepressible fancy of the French soldier has been freely exercised, little pieces of wood stuck in the clay walls at the bifurcation of passages serve as sign-boards, worded humouristically. Not only do I authorize these ornaments, but I am glad of them, as a favourable indication of an excellent moral. To be always on the point of chaff—under all circumstances even the most critical—is one of the characteristics of the French mind. Even on the worst days, I have noticed what close neighbours jocularity and tears are, and how sometimes they succeed each other rapidly. Is this a defect? Sometimes perhaps.

The Germans, who are at the antipodes of this turn of mind, make it one of the greatest reproaches they address to us by declaring with a sort of disdain that the French are “frivolous people.” But in spite of their opinion, or even because of it, we French stand up for our ancient Gallic blood, and we alone know how to estimate its value, as we alone know how to taste as connoisseurs our good French wines. So much the worse for all the stupid sausage-eaters and rigid doctors with gold-rimmed spectacles.\textsuperscript{191}

Antoine Redier was born in the Ile-de-France, but spent his childhood in Lille.\textsuperscript{192} For Redier, the influence of French nationalism came early:

It was there [Lille] that I learned to know my Motherland. I am not from Lille by birth, but all the first years of my studies were spent there and I have made precious friendships in that city. My country is not the French Flanders where I have lived, nor the Ile-de-France where I was born. I belong to the whole of France, but it was at Lille that I first learned it. Because I grew up with all my comrades in the midst of fervent national traditions, I have neither difficulty nor merit in serving to-day. I wish the same ardent devotion could be put in every French soul. One does not fight better, but with more love.

\textsuperscript{190} Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid., 114-5.

\textsuperscript{192} Redier, 248.
My love for the Motherland increased the day I learned that the enemy had profaned Lille with his presence. It horrifies me to-day to think that the Prussians are patrolling in the streets where I walked when I was a child.\textsuperscript{193}

Lieutenant Antoine Redier wrote an account of his thoughts and experiences at the front that read more like a piece of propaganda than a journal of wartime experience. Even so, he served at the front for France and came away resolutely nationalistic. His attitude revealed some light on this topic:

Only a certain provincial patriotism has survived among the people from the rural districts. It is narrow and exclusive but, nevertheless, it does not offend me. Since the beginning of the war our soldiers have wandered everywhere. Men mobilized from the farming regions of the North, who were sent through the “Vienne” valley, so beautiful between Limoges and Angoulême, could scarcely hide their contempt for ground where only grass and trees are able to grow.

“Don’t they have any wheat around here?” they asked.

The men from the centre of France, accustomed to the fresh valleys, pretty meadows, and groves of chestnut trees, were amazed at seeing the rich but monotonous plains of Picardy and Artois.

To fortify and strengthen the frail love that each of these men bears to his own corner of the earth it would have been enough to teach them the grandeur of the common Motherland.

The war is a splendid opportunity for doing this very thing. Instead of newspapers tell them that they are fighting for the civilization and liberty of the world. Nobody among the popular writers thinks of singing the praises of our Motherland, or claiming that it is for her sake that all this fine blood is being shed.

They read, just as I do, sentences of this kind in the morning newspapers: “We are not fighting for ourselves, it is for the world and the future. What are a few months of war in comparison with the fifty or a hundred years of prosperity and peace which we are preparing? Let our arms triumph and the whole earth will be at rest.”

Thus it is not for our own sakes that we are fighting, and the blood which we have shed, the ruined villages, the horrible suffering, the devastation, and the mourning in France are for the happiness of the human race! Some misguided French people dare to write, although they do not even know how to think. They do not realize that they have a Motherland. They see only vague forms in the clouds, when right in front of their eyes is living the most animated, saintly, and tragic of figures; this France, the inheritance of a hundred generations of ancestors; where we have been born, where we draw our breath and which we will leave to our sons, as sweet as she was when we first looked on her.

There are a few of us who do not wish any one to alter our language, our old customs, our cherished habits, our soil, our houses. We have good qualities and faults:

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 248-9.
let us keep them! The Germans may cultivate their virtues and their vices at home but they must not overflow on us. To each man his Motherland. We are fighting for ours. No doubt this atrocious war will still be long and always more cruel. What shall we do when it is finished? The dreamers say that peace will bring universal disarmament. I, who dream of my hearthside and of my children, do not speak in this manner. After the war I hope that we will surround France with such safeguards as will protect her for all time. …

I am unable to think of the whole of humanity, but of France alone, while French blood is flowing. I am not tempted to betray our dead, nor to ruin the cause for which they are dying by thousands. They fall to save the Motherland. If I survive the slaughter yet to come, I will consecrate all the days that God will give me to the safeguarding of this sacred Motherland. After that is done, if I have five minutes to spare, I will busy myself with the human race. 194

The nation rather than humanity received the focus of Redier’s attention. He continued describing his thoughts and perceptions, this time involving a conversation with another French soldier he encountered one night at the front:

Here is a man on guard in the trenches. He is watching vigilantly and his expression is one of hatred as he holds his eyes fixed on the enemy line. I approach him and tap his shoulder.

“What are you doing there?”
“I am on watch, my Lieutenant.”
“But what else?”
“I keep my eye on the Boches.”
“And what is behind your back?”
“Our sleeping comrades.”
“Yes, but behind them?”
“The beet fields.”
“And farther behind?”
“Well, I don’t know.”

I looked into his eyes; they are empty of thought. The good man would very much like to make a suitable reply, but where is he to find it? Let us help him.

“Why, thoughtless fellow, there is France.”
“It is true, I hadn’t thought of that.”

Why should he think of it? Ever since childhood he has heard nothing but that all men are brothers, that frontiers no longer exist and that the idea of a Motherland is a wicked invention of tyrants and capitalists. Patriotism survived only in the soil and in tradition. The French are linked together at present by virtue of the war; the common trial. But to know and love France, the Motherland, one must have either lived close to her soil or studied her history. This man works and lives in the city; he has not had the

194 Ibid., 243-6.
opportunity to develop a deep attachment for a field, or a meadow, or an old familiar brook. The books which have been given him to read have only taught him errors.

If I put the same question to a peasant he will be no whit more eloquent. The little motherlands which each village used to constitute have been at least spoiled, if not entirely destroyed. The mere fact of having spent one’s days, happy or dreary alike, on a certain patch of land is not alone sufficient to make one recognize in it the Motherland. The ground must also have been peopled with the images of the dead ancestors who have formerly owned it one after the other; who have done the same things at the same seasons—sung and danced on big feast days, prayed in the same church still standing, and lived the same simple life, rich in remembrances and promise—as the present owner. The peasant who keeps these traditions is bound to be patriotic, if not to his thirty-nine millions of living brothers, at least to his fathers. He will love France, if not for its present strength and size, at least for its past. Not being educated, but knowing more the history of his country that its geography, he will be capable of dying on the battlefield, and of telling you why he is willing to make that sacrifice.  

It was apparent that nationalism influenced the mind-set of Redier. What was also apparent was the romantic tendencies French nationalism displayed, as he continued writing,

To-day [sic] our natal soil has lost much of its virtue. The songs of long ago are forgotten and peasant and shepherdless [sic] repeat only the refrains of the music halls. They no longer go to church. The old women are silent and no longer recognize in their city-bred children the reflection of their own image. Instead of revering the dead this new generation looks down on them from a lofty height with [the] pity of their ignorance.  

The attempted return to the “glory days” of the past and the rejection of the modern era: those are ideas associated with the Romantic Movement. They were present in Redier’s understanding of French nationalism. For Redier, the French nation must redeem herself:

We must be ourselves jealous lovers of the Motherland, in order to instruct those ignorant people who either have forgotten the name of their country, or who render their devotion only to high-sounding, humanitarian words. We need not blush if our passion is exclusively for her; we are in good company. The enemy himself teaches us that lesson.

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195 Ibid., 239-41.
196 Ibid., 242.
197 Ibid., 252.
From there, according to Redier, France could redeem the world:

We now know, in company with the entire world, that the blood of our fathers, the kings of Europe and of the world by virtue of their manly qualities and genius, still runs in our veins. We must not content our pride with this lone, but let us resolve to demonstrate the same valiantness in peace as we have shown in war. On that condition alone will we give back to France and to ourselves that liberty so madly invoked in the last century and yet always betrayed.

Thus French glory can illuminate the world if we only wish it. We must entertain this thought in our hearts and proclaim it all about us. It is our only true comfort at such a time as this and, if we wish to avoid falling back into our former errors after the war, it must be our chief reliance.

Why are we fighting? Solely to retain mastery of our own genius, to draw from it noble joys and just profits when we have once more become wise.\(^{198}\)

The piety of French nationalism appeared as well in the story of a peasant father from Savoy who discovered that he lost one of his sons to the war.\(^{199}\) The father, reacting upon hearing the news, uttered, “God found them ready,” and went back to his plowing.\(^{200}\)

Nationalism still appeared even when Captain Ferdinand Belmont conceded the quality of the German Army. He noted that the French army learned some valuable lessons from the German soldiers:

And then we must indeed recognize that we have profited by the war, and that, at our expense, the Germans have taught us many things. It is painful and somewhat humiliating to have to admit that they have taught us the art of warfare, but we must do so. The utility of intrenchments [sic] and the way to organize them, the use of artillery and the indisputable importance of batteries of heavy guns—these and many other things they have taught us since the beginning. But alas, experience will have cost us dear.

We must persevere until the end, for it is now a question of perseverance. The one that can stand the wear and tear the longest (moral as much as, if not more than, physical wear and tear) will gain the victory. Whatever comes will be by the will and permission of God.\(^{201}\)

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\(^{198}\) Ibid., 260.

\(^{199}\) Belmont, 7. Savoy was only recently incorporated into France in 1860, though it was part of France during the French Revolution. A separatist movement exists there today.

\(^{200}\) Ibid.

\(^{201}\) Ibid., 113.
The arrogance of romantic nationalism gelled with rationalism. As for Captain Belmont, who received the Legion of Honor, fatalism proved to be too powerful of a force. He died in battle on 28 December, 1915.

Even when a French soldier lost sight of nationalism, it was fleeting. Lieutenant Giraudoux demonstrated this point during the Battle of the Marne, writing,

You see the frontier marked out, so to speak, by that chain of exhausted soldiers. For a second a wave of ingratitude sweeps over you toward all those civilians back in France who are thinking of you. Why must they exist? But for them, war would be beautiful. Then comes repentance, and, out of sheer affection for them, you begin to think of yourself with a tenderness much like theirs. “Poor old fellow,” you say to yourself. You call yourself by your first name, and by the nicknames they give you. Courage flows back into you, and you steal the best rifle and the best bayonet from the men who are still sleeping.202

French nationalism, however, was not all-inclusive. Algerian troops were viewed differently by the French, as Christian Mallet recorded,

We came upon a bivouac of Algerian troops, who were squatting on their heels, warming themselves, singing strange African melodies and giving to this corner of French soil an appearance of Algeria.

On hearing the sound of our horses they sprang to arms with guttural cries, but when they had recognised that we were French they insisted on embracing our officer and danced round us like children.203

On 21 August, Lieutenant Giraudoux noted the inclusion of a North African regiment in his division: “We are a division, and when they hear that we have some Maroccans with us their joy increases, like the joy of children who have gone to meet their uncle the explorer, and see him getting out of the train with a negro.”204

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202 Giraudoux, 211.

203 Mallet, 88.

204 Giraudoux, 113.
The Story of Marc Bloch

The story of Marc Bloch demonstrated the difference between French nationalism and German nationalism. Bloch served in both World War I and World War II, where he died before a German firing squad as leader of French resistance. Born in Lyons, 7 July 1886, Bloch obtained an impressive education. Focusing on medieval history, Bloch was already a published writer when the call to arms came in 1914. As a historian, Bloch had his own views on the development of France. “Marc Bloch, like many republican… scholars of his generation, viewed the history of France as a process in which the advancement of liberty and the formation of the French nation were intertwined.” However, “Bloch assumed the priority of studying the “ethnic unity” of the French people over burrowing in the details of the territorial formation of the French state.” Aged twenty-eight when war began, Bloch joined the 272nd reserve infantry regiment (18th company, 4th platoon) with the rank of sergeant, and on 10 August, his regiment left Amiens for the Meuse region, near the Belgian border. While recovering from

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205 Bloch, 16.

206 Ibid., 17-20. He attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand school and École Normale Supérieure, part of the University of Paris. He also spent one year studying in Germany.

207 Ibid., 21-4.

208 Ibid., 29.

typhoid fever in 1914-1915, he wrote his journal.\textsuperscript{210} Marc Bloch’s story was significant for the purposes of French nationalism. His parents were French Jews!\textsuperscript{211}

Bloch described the sentiment the declaration of war created, writing, “Out of the specter of war, the nation’s armies created a surge of democratic fervor.”\textsuperscript{212} His use of the term “democratic” merited consideration. He continued, describing the mood of the future combatants: “The men for the most part were not hearty; they were resolute, and that was better.”\textsuperscript{213} He went to the Meuse region from 11-21 August.\textsuperscript{214} Bloch reacted to the retreat back toward Paris, writing on 25 August

This immensely bitter disappointment, the stifling hear, the difficulties of marching along a road encumbered by artillery and convoys, and finally, the dysentery with which I was stricken the night before make the 25th of August live in my memory as one of the most painful days I have known.\textsuperscript{215}

The plight of the refugees troubled Bloch. Because of the retreat, he and his comrades could not protect these people. He noted how this, “…left a bitter impression, possibly the most maddening that the war has inflicted on us.”\textsuperscript{216} The days of the retreat were rough, and Bloch exclaimed, “Oh, what bitter days of retreat, of weariness, boredom, and anxiety!”\textsuperscript{217} “Tired of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{210} Bloch, 77.
\item \textsuperscript{211} Ibid., 17.
\item \textsuperscript{212} Ibid., 78.
\item \textsuperscript{213} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{214} Ibid., 79.
\item \textsuperscript{215} Ibid., 81.
\item \textsuperscript{216} Ibid., 84.
\item \textsuperscript{217} Ibid., 85.
\end{itemize}
doing nothing, the men were pleased but also solemn,” wrote Bloch, who thought he and his comrades would finally see action at the Marne on 6 September.\textsuperscript{218} They did not. Instead, they retreated further, and Bloch wrote, “So many times we had hoped to see it end: at the Meuse, at Grandpré, at almost all the villages in which we had billeted for a night, and finally, in the trenches of Larzicourt. Now once again we moved on. I believed all was lost.”\textsuperscript{219}

Morale was indeed low, as Bloch continued, “…I could only consider myself one more among the inglorious vanquished who had never shed their blood in combat.”\textsuperscript{220} Bloch grew more disillusioned with the war, as he noted on 10 September, “I nevertheless found war an ugly business, the faces of men awaiting and dreading death not beautiful to behold….”\textsuperscript{221} There was little fatalism here. As for the gloominess, it was short-lived. Courage sprung forth.

\begin{quote}
A few of our regiment had pushed on ahead of us and we had to catch up with them. I said “ordered,” but “beseeched” would be more accurate. “Let’s go, boys, we must move forward. Your comrades are out there in front. They’re firing. You can’t leave them alone. Noncoms, lead the way!” It was hard to leave our slope. I have already explained why it gave only meager protection, but we nonetheless had felt ourselves more secure than we really were. We had confidence in this chance cover, poor as it was, and we were filled with a quite understandable reluctance to launch ourselves upright into open space. I remember thinking very clearly at that moment, “Since the colonel wants it, we must get up and go forward. But it’s all over, there’s no use hoping. I will be killed.” Then we rose and ran. I shouted, “Forward, Eighteenth!” We reached a path that followed a slight rise in the ground. There, finding a small group of soldiers, we stopped…. The officers ordered us to open fire. My arm being too painful to manage my rifle, I simply transmitted the orders. In any case, firing over such a long distance at objects so difficult to see was undoubtedly ineffective. Some men near me were wounded. The day was nearly over. We prayed for the arrival of complete darkness, which would end the fighting. The German bombardment gradually slowed. At the same time
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{218} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{219} Ibid., 86-7.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 87.
\textsuperscript{221} Ibid., 91.
time, our guns picked up the pace. What joy to hear not German but French shells whistling above us and aimed at the enemy?222

The Germans were retreating. Bloch noted the event, writing,

Despite so many painful sights, it does not seem to me that I was sad on that morning of September 11. Needless to say, I did not feel like laughing. I was serious, but my solemnity was without melancholy, as befitted a satisfied soul; and I believe that my comrades felt the same. I recall their faces, grave yet content. Content with what? Well, first content to be alive. It was not without a secret pleasure that I contemplated the large gash in my canteen, the three holes in my coat made by bullets that had not injured me, and my painful arm, which, on inspection, was still intact. On days after a great carnage… life appears sweet. Let those who will condemn this self-centered pleasure. Such feelings are all the more solidly rooted in individuals who are ordinarily only half aware of their existence. But our good humor had another, more noble source. The victory that the colonel had announced to us so briefly as he trotted by had elated me. Perhaps if I had thought about it, I might have felt some doubts. The Germans had retreated before us, but how did I know that they had not advanced elsewhere? Happily, my thoughts were vague. The lack of sleep, the exertions of the march and combat, and the strain of my emotions had tired my brain; but my sensations were vivid. I had little comprehension of the battle. It was the victory of the Marne, but I would not have known what to call it. What matter, it was victory. The bad luck that had weighed us down since the beginning of the campaign had been lifted. My heart beat with joy in our small, dry devastated valley in Champagne.223

His regiment suffered over one-quarter wartime casualties.224 By 16 September, Bloch found that the French, at least his regiment, were no longer advancing, and he wrote, “I was tired and had a touch of fever. The enthusiasm of victory was gone.”225

Bloch also noted the issues with the command structure of the French army. He wrote,

We were very inexperienced. We were poorly nourished, and at that time our provisioning functioned most unsatisfactorily. But above all, still clothed in the uniforms

222 Ibid., 92.
223 Ibid., 94-5.
224 Ibid., 35.
225 Ibid., 101.
in which we had started out, without sweaters, blankets, or raincoats, we were as poorly equipped as southerners thrown abruptly into the hoarfrosts of the north.\textsuperscript{226}

He even argued with his lieutenant, and later admitted his lack of discipline, writing, “My obedience, however, was not as complete as it should have been.”\textsuperscript{227} On 12 October, he also shared a lack of discipline in his own French regiment:

We dreaded a surprise attack. The thickness of the underbrush made the darkness all the blacker. Night is not silent in the forest. The rustling of branches, the light grating of the dry leaves tossed to the ground by the wind, and the occasional sounds of wings and paws, all this music of the shadows, so faint but incessant, disturbed us. We were afraid we would not hear the Germans in time if they advanced. If we had been wise, we would have awaited the dawn in peace. Today I realize that the Germans did not dream of attacking us that night. Indeed, from time to time, without leaving their trenches, they fired a few routine shots intended less to hit us than to keep up their spirits. Our behavior, I regret to report, was quite insane. Taking these harmless gestures seriously, we responded with a furious fusillade. Naturally, they answered in kind, though weakly and without conviction. We began again, more vigorously than ever. No one could aim. If our bullets hit anyone, it could only have been some peaceable service personnel in the rear, a few kilometers behind the German lines, because we were aiming much too high. Moreover, our opponents were neither more skillful nor more careful than we. Almost the entire night was passed in the middle of an infernal racket: detonations, whistling bullets, and commands to “Fire!” The sole result of all this hubbub was to make it impossible to sleep…. Such was our first night in the trenches, and I should not hold it up as a model. The captain sent word to us to be less prodigal with our ammunition in the future.\textsuperscript{228}

Bloch’s regiment went forward toward the Argonne Forest, and he wrote about his experience in Gruerie after a brutal attack on 18-19 October:

Not always, to be fair, but often it is the result of an effort… that a healthy individual makes without injury to himself and which rapidly becomes instinctive…. Death ceases to appear very terrible at the moment it seems close: it is this, ultimately, that explains courage. Most men dread going under fire, and especially returning to it. Once there, however, they no longer tremble. Also, I believe that few soldiers, except the most noble or intelligent, think of their country while conducting themselves bravely;

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid., 103.

\textsuperscript{227} Ibid., 110.

\textsuperscript{228} Ibid., 119-20.
they are much more often guided by a sense of personal honor, which is very strong when it is reinforced by the group.\footnote{Ibid., 39.}

Bloch described the evolution of trench warfare and the beginnings of the live-and-let-live system. There were times when, “The Germans, who were not far off but whom we never saw, did not disturb our peace. They fired from time to time, especially at night.”\footnote{Ibid., 134.} He also described his ambition to communicate with the enemy, writing, “We were too near our adversaries not to be tempted to communicate with them. I wrote them a sort of proclamation. We had been told that there were some Poles among them, so I invited them to desert.”\footnote{Ibid., 141-2.}

Unfortunately, he was unable to send the invitation due to a minor wound he received.\footnote{Ibid., 142.}

\section*{The Sympathy of Soldiery}

The French soldiers maintained a positive relationship with the civilians of Belgium. The influence of the Enlightenment on French nationalism aided this situation, along, of course, with Belgium being an ally of France. J. Georges Scapini noted how the Belgians responded when his troop crossed the frontier:

One afternoon we were suddenly ordered out for a forced march in the direction of Charleroi. The German plan of campaign had burst into the full light of day. From Thil-le-Château, in the Ardennes, to Jerpines, near Châtelet in Belgium—it was a triumphal march through the country. The Belgians welcomed us as liberators. Our way was “lined” with provisions—buckets of milk, buckets of wine from which the men filled their quart canteens. We quaffed alternately the milk and the wine, which we especially enjoyed.

The people counted on us to drive back the Germans, whose presence had been reported just beyond the Sambre. This confidence made us feel sure that we were going...
to win. True, we had not fought yet, but this sense of anticipated success was very pleasant to us all the same.²³³

He also noted his feelings when the Germans forced the French to retreat, writing

The civilians were fleeing, the soldiers were retreating—the distinction is a subtle one. Isolated groups joined other groups, and as we went through the villages I saw not those joyful crowds which had welcomed us with such cheering, but some tragic faces with eyes sad, unutterably sad eyes, that gazed at us as we passed.²³⁴

French trooper, Christian Mallet, also demonstrated sentimental feelings during his interaction with Belgian civilians when he marched to the frontier:

It was on the 6th of August that we crossed the frontier into the Walloon district of Belgium at Muno, to bring succor to the Belgians whose territory had just been violated by the German Army.

In turning over my diary, I select this incident from among many others and stop to describe it, for it seems but right to recall the enthusiastic and touching welcome with which the whole people greeted us—a people now, alas, crushed under the German heel. We were welcomed with open arms—they gave without counting the cost, they threw open their doors to us and could not do enough for the French who had come to join forces with them and bring them succor.

There is not a trooper in my regiment, not a soldier in our whole army, who does not recall that day with feelings of profound emotion.²³⁵

He continued describing the French army’s entrance into Belgium:

After exhausting days of twelve or fourteen hours in the saddle I noticed that the troopers, worn out with fatigue, suffering from the heat, from hunger and thirst and intolerable stiffness, sat up in their saddles instinctively as we approached a village, prompted by an

²³³ Scapini, 52-3.

²³⁴ Ibid., 59. An interesting side note was how Scapini actually met Roland Dorgeles, who authored the book, Wooden Crosses, during the war. Dorgeles’s work was the French equivalent to Erich Marie Remarque’s All Quiet on the Western Front. Dorgeles described Scapini’s courage under fire when received a wound in the head, blinding him, in an article in L’Intransigeant. After Scapini received his wound during a German attack, he regrouped, took command of the grenadiers—the sergeant had been killed, threw grenades himself, and caused the Germans to withdraw.

²³⁵ Mallet, 26-7.
unconscious sense of pride in holding up their heads, and I can say, for my part, that such a welcome as we received always banished any feelings of fatigue. 236

Unfortunately, Mallet also shared the same experience as Scapini.

One of our bitterest regrets was having to pass again through Belgium in the reverse direction and to read the dumb surprise on the faces of the people who had thought us unconquerable, but whose great hearts were full only of commiseration for us, worn out as we were, and who, forgetful of their own anxieties, did all in their power to help us. 237

During the French withdrawal, his sentiment continued: “We meet long convoys of inhabitants who, panic-stricken, quit their houses to go and camp anywhere at all. It is lamentable.” 238

Eventually, Mallet and the French return to Belgium, and Mallet recorded what he observed upon his return, writing, “It is not again a triumphal entry on a fine August morning, it is a march past ruins and over rubbish heaps.” 239 He shared a moving experience shortly later at a small Belgian village:

At Outersteene, however, we were received with touching manifestations of confidence and enthusiasm; an old tottering and broken-down teacher had drawn up before the school a score of young lads of seven to ten years old, who watched us passing and sang the *Marseillaise* with all their lungs, while the old man beat the time.

The village had been evacuated only three days ago, and it was from the thresholds of its houses, partly fallen in and still smoking, that this song rose, a sincere and spontaneous outburst. 240

After entering German land, Giraudoux chronicled himself having, “Breakfast with Deavux [comrade] at an old Alsatian’s, a deaf-mute who is eager to serve us, protected as he is

236 Ibid., 30.

237 Ibid., 31.

238 Ibid., 37.

239 Ibid., 96.

240 Ibid.
by his infirmities from any denunciation for treat. Yet, Giraudoux continued his account suggesting a traces appetite for conquering. Lieutenant Jean Giraudoux described the mindset of the French soldiers after entering Alsace, a German territory in 1914.

The discovery of a hen’s egg, and then a duck’s egg, brings us by lunch-time to the idea of the omelet which we prepare at the house of two German twin sisters. At last we have the impression of being conquerors! The least word from us sets this pair of likenesses off at a run-colliding as they go: blonde and brunette, both to do our pleasure. On the walls, with their gray paper, we note some square patches of a lighter shade. Evidently they were once covered by picture-frames—indeed, one might reconstruct the whole Imperial Family, according to their more or less faded hue. I scare the slaves to death by asking them where they have hidden these portraits, and Devaux, with no malicious intent, puts questions that are now threatening, now polite: Has the Emperor really got creeping paralysis? What are their Christian names? How is the war going to end? What does the word “gemütlich” mean? They answer only the polite questions, but do so in the terror that the sacrilegious inquiries have roused: their names—tremblingly—are Elsa and Johanna: gemütlich means, “when all is well, when all is gay.” “Yesterday ist es gemütlich,” says Devaux, by way of example.

“Ja,” they reply, “ja.”
One has only to dangle the word “gemütlich” before a German woman’s eyes to make her answer with these joyous brayings.242

“Conquerors,” not liberators! Giraudoux “scare[d] the slaves to death.” These were not the attitudes of liberators. When ordered to retreat, Giraudoux again used the term “conqueror,” stating “…that as there is no further resistance in Alsace, there is no more need of conquering it.”243 Did Giraudoux and his fellow combatants commit atrocities? He spent several pages discussing the women of the area in his writing, but suggested no impropriety.244 Was there more to this story, or did Giraudoux simply like women?

242 Ibid.
243 Ibid., 46.
244 Ibid., 38-43.
The evidence and situation suggested nothing more to the story occurred. The Alsatians were not on friendly terms with the German government due to the Saverne Affair and the limitations of its local government, so the civilians proved easy to “conquer.” Meanwhile, Devaux, who was Giraudoux’s comrade, appeared to personify the Enlightenment attributes of French nationalism in this story. The Alsatians, in fact, appeared happy with the French. While withdrawing, the French soldiers went through Thann, in Haut-Rhine, Alsace, where people cheered the French soldiers: “The whole of Thann acclaims us—so suddenly that at first we look at each other, and then stare in every direction to discover what victorious regiment may be marching through.” The French asked the people of Thann about the Germans, and the people responded, “Down with the oppressors! Long live liberty!” Giraudoux described how he and the other men offered some children cake because “we have bought out the pastry-shops.” This did not sound like conquerors engaged in barbarism. Even when Giraudoux lost his temper on one occasion, it was only temporary: “I get even with modern Germany by tearing up a picture of Tirpitz, and one of an unknown student with three saber-cuts, and hide the fragments in Magda’s [his Alsatian hostess’s] shoe-box, on the left-hand shelf.” Though he committed the action, he immediately felt remorse, causing him to hide the shattered possessions.

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245 See Introduction.

246 Giraudoux, 49-50.

247 Ibid., 58.

248 Ibid., 61.

249 Ibid., 65.

250 Ibid. Alfred von Tirpitz was an Admiral of the German navy.
Conclusion

Camaraderie, courage, and devotion to romantic-rational nationalism allowed the French soldiers to overcome the obstacles of both the initial German advance and the inherent problems of command and discipline within the army of France. French troopers, as a whole, exhibited enthusiasm for war, and this enthusiasm translated to nationalism. It proved to be a hybrid of ideas stemming from Romanticism and the Enlightenment. Training shaped the adventure of war. In training, the French soldiers noticed problems involving discipline and leadership within the French Army. The ordeal of combat allowed the true mindset of the troopers to appear. Ideas of camaraderie and acts of courage helped the combatants through the ordeal of war. Ideas about the nation also assisted their cause. Attitudes toward civilians and members of the nation demonstrated that the French trial of war differed from the German ordeal. The experience of the French soldiers demonstrated that though similarities existed between their form of nationalism and German nationalism, French nationalism ultimately proved to be a different variety. French soldiers’ sympathy toward civilians and the case of Marc Bloch both supported this idea.
CHAPTER FIVE

THE BRITISH ARMY: THE SENSE OF “BRITISHNESS”

On 29 September, 1906, a British newspaper discussed Richard Burdon Haldane’s assurances to his constituents at Haddington.1

There was nothing that had a more steady and sober influence on the mind of the population than to be brought closely into contact with the machinery of war. The phrase, ‘a nation in arms’, did not mean a nation permeated by the spirit of militarism, but it meant a nation that realized what arms signified, what a terrible resort that appeal was if come it must and caused them to pursue their business more soberly, more steadily, more wisely, because they knew it touched themselves in their hearths and homes.2

This was the timely analysis of Haldane’s words by a local paper, a Scottish paper at that.

Richard Burdon Haldane served in the British government as the Secretary of State for War, 1905-12.3 It was under his leadership that reforms were carried out within the British army. He entered the position at a time when the government came under pressure to reform and modernize national and imperial defense. In 1902, A. J. Balfour’s government created the Officers’ Training Corps, the Committee of Imperial Defense, and, in 1904, the General Staff.

Even so, many thought Britain’s resources inadequate. The British simply could not provide for a large army in a time where mass armies were the trend. The writer and observer, H. G. Wells, “Saw volunteers crowd the street of London in thousands, leaning against wall, sitting on the

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2 Ibid.

pavement, day after day, tired hungry, trying to enlist, but unable to do so because the authorities unprepared.⁴ Even Winston Churchill, First Lord of the Admiralty in the Liberal government, noted the lack of rifles and guns, and there were only a modest supply of shells and ammunition. The island nation tried desperately improving their battle readiness. Lord Haldane stepped into this environment.⁵ He served six and a half years after 1906 at the War office preparing Britain for at least some state of readiness. His work sparked the plans Britain followed when war seemed near. The British plan called for dispatching its expeditionary force as quickly as possible across the Channel to assist the French army in checking the advance of the Germans toward Paris. Despite these deliberate preparations, there was no inevitability about Britain’s entry into the war in August 1914. Most of the members of the Liberal government detested the whole idea. In July, less than one month before the war began, half of the Liberal cabinet remained opposed to British participation in a war. As historian Edward M. Spears pointed out,

Haldane had never simply intended that his military reorganization should bring about an armée d’élite; he had a broader purpose, namely the creation of a ‘nation in arms’ in which the army would be brought ‘into a close and organic relation with the life of the nation’.⁶


⁵ Haldane worked through the Liberal Party, which distrusted militarism and only asked for an army on the cheap. Its brigades were not formed into divisions. It lacked transport, medical units, and guns. It had a second line, the militia, which could not be used abroad, and a third line of yeomanry and volunteers, formed in many local units, unorganized and half equipped. It was Haldane’s work to create a striking force, ready to the last button on mobilization, to take its place alongside the French army in resisting Germany and holding the Channel ports. Haldane created an expeditionary force, with six infantry and one cavalry divisions, which could be mobilized within fifteen days, and he created a Home Force or Territorial Army composed of partly-trained men who would not fight until some months later. He also established officers’ training corps at the universities and schools.

As Haldane noted in his post-war memoirs, “what we set ourselves to accomplish, we did accomplish.” After the war, Lord Haldane indeed felt the British Expeditionary Force proved to be this “nation in arms.”

What Lord Haldane recognized was the power of the nation, and how that power could be utilized on the battlefield. He also, prudently, observed that “with great power, comes great responsibility.” A nation needed not to be bellicose or aggressive, not when it allowed for freedom, liberty, and individualism. This was the nation of Great Britain. These tenets, rooted in the Enlightenment, were the stem of this interesting case of nationalism. The British version found a nation united by freedom. This freedom allowed for individualism, uniqueness, flexibility, and ethnic identity. Tolerance was part of British nationalism as well. In this culture, the individuals that comprised the nation of Britons fought for this type of nationalism.

The obvious difference between the British Army and its continental counterparts of France and Germany was not only the influence of its unique form of nationalism, but also the influence of professionalism. Would nationalism influence the professional soldier the same way it influenced the conscripted? For the British professional, elements of nationalism were at work. Though there were variations on the levels, the levels were present.

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8 This is not an original idea, but rather a reoccurring theme from Marvel Comics’ Spiderman series.
A Rose by any other Name

What was in a name? Titles or labels had many different meanings, but words represented how people expressed and described everything that they perceived. By paying attention to words, in this case the written word, seemingly trivial words relayed the pertinent information and underlying meanings with regard to nationalism.

Those underlying meanings manifested themselves within the chronicles of the British soldier in 1914. The “subtle” difference between “British” and “English” was not so subtle. What label or title used in 1914 suggested how nationalized the British really were. For several members of the British Expeditionary Force, the idea of belonging to a nation of Britons was at hand. In a letter home, Lieutenant-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe used the term “British soldier.” Here was an example of inclusion. For Wollocombe, it was not about Gellner’s argument of “megalomania” overtaking “ruritania,” it was about the nation of Britons. British soldier F. M. Packham, at age seventy-four, recalled joining the British Army in 1912. An anonymous soldier from the 9th Brigade (Iron Brigade), used the term “British” while describing the engagement at Mons. One J. W. Palmer kept a diary during his service, and he used the expression “British warms” on 10 September. Colonel W. A. C. Saunders Knox Gore, recollecting at age eighty-five, reiterated Linda Colley’s idea of “Britishness” when he used the

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9 Lt.-Col T.S. me Wollocombe, 89/26/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 52.


11 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

term “British” every time he referred to his comrades. Captain L. A. Kenny not only used the word “British” in his writing, but he also invoked memories of how “Britishness” developed.

He mentioned encamping where Napoleon encamped when he threatened Britain with invasion, and then thanked Lord Horatio Nelson and the “British” navy for altering Napoleon’s plan. A self-proclaimed Scotsman, J. McIlwain, also demonstrated his allegiance when he wrote the term “British” on 14 September, while describing the Battle of the Aisne.

British regular, W. Clarke of “The Queen’s Bays,” also demonstrated his thoughts on the subject matter as he recollected the carnage during the retreat from Mons: “It was my first sight of multiple death in battle. Many men and horses, both German and British dead and abandoned guns. At the count I think the Queens Bays lost about 150 horses, at least half of that amount killed, the others lost by stampeding.”

In a hand-written account of his service during the heated months of 1914, P. Botting used the term “British” to describe the troops on 7 October.

Sir Cecil Lowther, who discussed how he wrote his diary “more or less day by day, sent home in installments, typed at home, and circulated among family” also believed in the idea of “Britishness.” While describing the retreat and how the men dealt with it, Sir Lowther showed nothing but praise for

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13 See Colonel W. A. C. Knox Gore Saunders, 75/132/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. In particular, chapter three (no page numbers) and pages 4-5.


15 Ibid.

16 J. McIlwain, 96/29/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.

17 W. Clarke, 87/18/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.

18 P. Botting, 97/18/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. He repeats this again on 2 November.

the “British soldier.” Major J. L. Mowbray, while writing about attire, used the expression “British uniform.” Harry M. Dillon, who eventually made captain, also followed this trend while writing about the initial fighting between Britain and Germany. Dillon noted how “it was the British Army who saved France thank god” during the retreat.

The question remained if soldiers used the term “England” as a destination or point of departure, were they then not “Britonized?” This was a tenuous question, indeed. An anonymous soldier referred to England as a destination shortly after arriving on the continent. He repeated this when he wrote about Ypres. Lieutenant Rowland H. Owen referred to not waiting until he could drink a draught beer in England later in another letter to his mother and father, dated 30 August 1914. In his writing on 16 August, 1914, one Lieutenant G. A. Loyd complained about the lack communication due to war. “Although we are only 40 miles from the frontier and about 70 from the firing line not a word of information has reached us. War might have terminated for ought we can tell.” Loyd continued, stating, “All letters are to be held up for a fortnight before being sent on, which makes it very hard to keep communication with

20 Ibid., 2. Sir Lowther also uses the expression “British Warm” to describe his coat on page 5.


22 See Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

23 Ibid., 9.


25 Ibid., 7.


England.” While writing about the events that transpired on 13 September, Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Kempthorne, from Cornwall, used the term England when describing a destination. Yet, he used the term “British,” when referring to the troops, while writing about the same exact day. He then used the term “English” when referring to the army while writing about events on 14 October. As aforementioned, Kempthorne was from Cornwall, an area of the island that possessed strong Celtic roots. Still, Kempthorne, as his words suggested, considered himself English and British.

Others, however, still viewed Britain with Ernst Gellner’s lenses, seeing “megalomania” and “megalomania. This occurred, at least, in the beginning. Cyclist T. H. Cubbon, in his hand-written journal, used the term “English” frequently. Even a popular marching song of the regular army in 1914 demonstrated the “megalomania” notion.

“Send out the Army and the NAVY
Send out the rank and file.
(Have a banana!)
Send out the brave Territorials,
They’ll face the danger with a smile.
(I don’t think!)
Send out the boys of the girls’ brigade,
They will keep old England free;

28 Ibid.
29 Lt-Col G. A. Kempthorne, 79/17/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 This topic received discussion in Chapter Two, where Gellner argued how the high culture of “megalomania” superimposed itself on the rural culture of “ruritania” in forging nationalism.
33 Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. He repeats this trend several times, including pages 21 and 23.
Send out my mother, my sister and my brother,
But for Gawd’s sake don’t send me!”

Yet, as the war continued, he changed to the term “British” to describe the troops at the Battle of Ypres. British regular H. Spencer, noted the rumor that “England had declared war with Germany.” Even still, Spencer also referred to the soldiers as “British Tommies” in his handwritten manuscript. Lieutenant Rowland H. Owen felt the term “English” was more appropriate when discussing the war in a letter to his mother and father, dated 24 September, 1914. British regular B. C. Myatt stated “England” in his pencil written diary on 17 October, and not as a destination. He followed this up later while writing about the German atrocities he encountered on 17 October, exclaiming “God help England if we are defeated by these divils [sic].” Though Myatt’s view leaned towards identifying himself as English, his major, while attempting to rally his men on 18 October, showed a different perspective. “Our Major spoke and said ‘keep calm and cool my men, be Britons, if they advance they are to come over our dead bodies.’” One Major B. T. St. John, while writing his account in 1915, communicated to the French during a misunderstanding on 17 October, 1914 that he and his men were, in fact,


35 Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 63.

36 H. Spencer, 85/43/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

37 Ibid.


39 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.
“English.”  Even the aforementioned Harry M. Dillon used the term “Englishman” when comparing the losses of troops with the Germans, but this was not in his journal but rather a letter.  Was it possible that the recipient influenced his writing? In another letter to a different individual, Dillon used the term “English” as well. Another example of Gellner’s argument for the “megalomania” of London imposing its high culture on the rest of the island involved Lieutenant G. A. Loyd. Lt. Loyd was born in London and educated at Eton and Magdalen College. He entered the Scots Guards as a Second Lieutenant in 1911, and was awarded the Croix de Chevalier de la Legion d’Honneur on 7 September, 1914. He used the term “English” rather than “British” in reference to the cavalry on 16 August, 1914. He again used the expression, writing about the “English theatre” during the Battle of the Aisne on 18 September. Still, was the Londoner more British than English? The answer, perhaps, rested with his entry on 13 September, 1914 when the concern over his army brought him to write his hopes.

Let us hope that it will not be necessary for the small British Army to become involved in an action of enormous frontage and of desperate resistance, and causing terrible losses to the Allies. Anything like a last stand on the defensive made by the German Army in France must be to the death on one side or the other of the forces concerned, unless their flanks are turned.


44 Ibid., 13-4. This trend continues as he uses the term “English” in two more of his letters, both to the same two people noted in the body.

45 Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 3.

48 Ibid., 29.

49 Ibid., 23.
Lt. Loyd’s identity demonstrated further transparency while describing his pride in his comrades on 15 September.

The British Army at this moment is making history. With a small force extended upon a large front clinging to the slopes of a position chosen by the enemy and well prepared several days before after terribly heavy losses and with absolutely no reserves, it is defying a force which has three Army Corps against the I, II, and III. Divisions, and which could mass a force and march straight through us, did it only know the true state of affairs. 50

This trend continued when he wrote about the “British Army” and the “British troops” on 14 October, mentioned “the British Forces” on 17 October, and used the expression, “British Army” on the next day. 51 Did his service cause the change in terminology? Loyd appeared to utilize the term “British” more often as the war continued, while utilizing the term “English” less. Still, he did not completely forget his London roots when he referred to the “English artillery” on 2 November. 52 His captain, W. A. Nugent, also followed that theme when he wrote to Loyd’s father, relaying the tragic news of Loyd’s death. 53 Nugent wrote, stating Loyd “‘in the Scots Guards who was attached to the Mounted Troops 2nd Division was killed in action yesterday.’” 54 Loyd was returning to the dugout when, “a shrapnel burst over him – penetrating behind the shoulder blade and traveling on into his stomach.” 55 He was taken to an “English” hospital, but

50 Ibid., 26.

51 Ibid., 46, 47, 49, and 50. Loyd continues this trend, writing about the British Force(s) on pages 53-4 and 58.

52 Ibid., 67.

53 Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid.
unfortunately, Lieutenant G. A. Loyd died on the way.\textsuperscript{56} The ironic part of this was Captain Nugent was from Westmeath, a county in central Ireland.

Though seemingly trivial, there was a subtle meaning these soldiers conveyed when they made the choice to use the terms “British” or “English.” Was it a subconscious choice? Perhaps! Still, the soldiers made the choice, and though several chose to write the term, “English,” even they succumbed to some possible moments of self-consciously writing what they may have felt: a feeling of “Britishness.”\textsuperscript{57}

\textbf{Varieties of “Britishness”}

What seemed to be a common theme from the accounts of the British soldiers was how they could differentiate between regiments and brigades based on ethnic background but at the same time cheered them on when they performed well (though they noted if they fought poorly).\textsuperscript{58} There was a notice of the differences, yet a bond nonetheless. For many of the British soldiers, they were, at the end of the day, all British.

\textsuperscript{56} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{57} This work is arguing a possible connection exists between words and identity.

\textsuperscript{58} The reader will notice the Welsh being omitted in this section. The main reason for this involved the lack of material that focused on the differences between the Welsh and English. The Welsh appeared more “Anglo-ized” than the Scottish and Irish, so there is less material noting the differences in the Welsh. Also, determining with all certainty that soldiers were from Wales proved difficult. Brigadier-General H. C. Rees, mentioned in this work, served in the 2/Welsh Battalion, but it was unclear if he was, in fact, Welsh. For a history on Welsh regiments, one on the Royal Welsh Fusiliers exists. See James Churchill Dunn, \textit{The War the Infantry Knew 1914-1919: a Chronicle of Service in France and Belgium}, (London: Janes Pub. Co, 1987).
While serving as a “forward observing officer,” or a F.O.O., with the Middlesex Regiment, Captain L. A. Kenny noted the difference even between himself and a London regiment. He was amused by them, stating,

they being a typically cockney regiment. At a certain intersection of the trenches some wit had painted on the wall “Piccadilly Circus”, and on the walls of other trenches leading off they had put up such names as Regent Street, Coventry Street and Shaftesbury Avenue etc.\(^59\)

Even within the English, differences existed. Differences amongst the British soldiers as a whole were magnified. The English, Scottish, and Irish soldiers all possessed their own perceptions, but in the end, they all shared a common view. They were all British!

Issues were still present. Sir Cecil Lowther, on 23 August, noticed a defective practice by the Welsh, though he conceded it may have been an army-wide issue. He noted that the town of Peissant, “…was held by the Welsh, their Bn’s. scattered over a wide front. This scattering of troops seems to me to be our chief failing.”\(^60\) On 17 October, B. C. Myatt noted a situation with the German artillery guns, and also noted how some of the regiments reacted, including the Irish. “Their guns cannot find us but they are playing hell with our infantry knocking them to pieces. The R. Irish, Midds and North Fus are copping out.”\(^61\)

*The Scottish: “For Ye Take the High Road”*\(^62\)

Lt-Col Wollocombe formulated his own opinion of the Scottish, when he wrote,


\(^{60}\) Lowther, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 10.

\(^{61}\) Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\(^{62}\) This is a line from the Scottish folk song, *Loch Lomond*. 
A Cameron Highlander, with a mess tin full of tea, offered it to me, but I told him to give it to the men. They were great friends of ours and are still. The Regiments were together for about 8 years, and I often heard them spoken of as ‘our Regiment’ by our men. A Colour Sergeant once remarked to me at Devonport at a Sergeants’ dance, that the Royal Scots were our Regiment here, “but of course the Cameroons were really our Regiment.”

He continued his praise of the Scottish soldiery, stating on 26 August at Mons, “I found the Royal Scots hard at work digging trenches…” The Scottish regulars left an impression on Wollocombe, indeed. While viewing a German attack at Mons, he noted,

The enemy by this time were collecting large masses of troops… in front of us about 800 yards away in some houses (farm buildings) and we expected a vigorous attack, but they met the fire of the Royal Scots and Gordons who were on our left, and it stopped them.

B. C. Myatt, on 20 November, felt Scottish irregulars who recently arrived were performing well, though stealing a bit of thunder from the regulars. “London Scottish got all the praise. It’s a shame on the regulars who are doing so much here.” He continued to discuss the able performance of non-English regiments as well as English ones on 25 November, stating, “We have the Gloucesters Munsters and South Wales Borderers in front of us now. Good mobs.” On 26 November, Myatt noted how cold it was, but he also noted his fellow Britons, writing “…up to your knees in sluch [sic] now and terrible cold. Still, the Glasgow Scottish are

64 Ibid., 41.
65 Ibid., 44.
66 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
67 Ibid.
in front of us now. Plenty of Territorials in the front of us now for the first time doing well, also the Liverpool Scottish.”

One J. McIlwain emphasized his heritage, noting “I’m not English, I’m a Scoatchman from Newcastle!” He continued, writing how he was raised Catholic, and he served with mostly Irish. McIlwain rose to the rank of Quarter-Master Sergeant, but he was later reprimanded on 10 November for losing part of his company’s rations, including rum. Though the army reverted him back to sergeant, he held no grudge on his replacement, who happened to be an Englishman, writing, “A fine young English sergt. called Webb, of the steady English temperament useful in Irish corps is made q.m.s. in my stead.”

Londoner Lieutenant G. A. Loyd noted the Scottish contribution to the war effort on 14 September. During the Battle of the Aisne, he wrote about the scene involving the Highland Light Infantry.

Landon’s 3rd Brigade losing 40 officers and 1000 men. The 4th Guards Brigade saved the situation during the day, arriving on the heights above Soupir only just in time to save the 6th Brigade from being rolled back down the hill. –One of the H.L.I. (Highland Light Infantry) managed to work his way up to a German machine gun section, and killing all the men, captured the gun himself. –It is reported to have been a grim and magnificent piece of fighting as the Guards with a wedge of German infantry forced into their centre advanced in the wooded slopes under a fierce shell fire. Their losses were very heavy in officers and men.

68 Ibid.
70 Ibid., 33.
71 Ibid., 37. He does note how he felt a senior officer possibly swiped the rations, mainly the rum, because of the stench of rum that was present on his person.
72 Ibid.
Loyd continued to see the effectiveness of the Scots on 24 October.

During the day the enemy attacked the 1st Division and in particular the 1st Guards Brigade in front of Langemarck, who however executed great havoc in the hostile lines with machine gun fire, the 1st Battalion Scots Guards using this weapon to great effect upon the enemy advancing down a sunk lane in close formation. Gen. Bulfin brought the 2nd Brigade to support the attacked and advancing with considerable tactical skill, pressed the enemy from their trenches with the aid of the 1st Guards Brigade, and drove them back. In this action we lost about 100 men killed and 600 wounded. The enemy lost over 1500 killed with a total casualty list of about 15,000. This was the 23 German Army Corps. The defeat was too great for it and it was withdrawn from the firing line in a N.W. direction, having ceased to exist as a fighting force for the time. From this Corps about 650 prisoners were taken.74

The recognition of the Scottish continued, as Major B. T. St. John, while writing his memoirs in 1915, recalled a soldier named Gordon of the Gordon Highlanders fighting bravely in late October 1914.

It was during these days that Gordon fought so gallantly. His company was in our right flank trenches and the trenches again on his right were held by another Brigade. The Regiment in the trenches on his right gave way before a German attack and the Germans got right through behind us and charged Gordon from front and read, having captured a field gun, Gordon got his men out of his trenches and charged three times and eventually drove the Germans off. They had to abandon the gun too but they got some straw and lit a fire under the limber containing the cordite, etc. This fire was seized by one of our corporals who carried it out into the open and so saved the explosion and the gun though he was killed himself. In that fight Gordon lost all of his officers and most of his men but we still held the trenches.75

_The Irish: “The Wild Rovers”_76

Irish men served in the British Army. Not only did they serve, they served, by accounts, very well. They participated in this “nation at arms,” and even though they were not Britons,

74 Ibid., 56.

75 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 34-5.

76 This is a play on words of the Irish folk song, _The Wild Rover_.

there was a degree of Britishness involved in their performance. H. Spencer related his past experience with the Irish during the Home Rule issue.

I was in Ireland on the Home Rule business helping to keep Sir Redmond’s and Sir Edward Carson’s army quiet. People, who read the papers, no doubt obtained a rough idea of what Dublin was like: we were not even allowed to go about alone: one could always see groups of British Tommies together in case of accidents. It was not too bad until a certain regiment tried killing civilians: that upset Dublin but after a great struggle we managed to escort the regiment out of the town and this made things rather better. A man’s life in the above regiment was not worth much in those days though we got used to the rough mobs after a time.77

Spencer, who would refer to himself as “being English,” spent time in Ireland with the army; after moving from Dublin to Ulster, he “got in good” with the population.78

Harry M. Dillon noticed the soldiery of the Irish when he wrote a letter to “E.D.” on 23 September, stating, “An Irish regiment were the first to get on top, they fought like nothing on earth.”79 Lieutenant-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe had trouble finding the rest of his regiment (Middlesex Regiment) during the trials of the retreat from Mons, but he “found plenty of Royal Irish….”80 The suggestion Lt-Col Wollocombe made was how the Royal Irish kept together during the retreat, demonstrating effective soldiery. Wollocombe had much interaction with the Royal Irish. He exclaimed, upon seeing the Irish Guards of 1st Corps, “we found the Irish Guards… digging hard to hold back the enemy….”81 Unfortunately, on 20 October,

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77 Spencer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
78 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 37.
Wollocombe noted, “The Royal Irish were cut off in front of us and after a good deal of heavy fighting they were all captured.”

Lieutenant N. L. Woodroffe, of the 1st Battalion Irish Guards, fought bravely; unfortunately, he did not survive. His captain, J. F. Trefusis, informed the father of the bravery of the son as well as his death in a letter dated 14 November. “On Nov. 1st when some of the Battalion had to retire owing to being shelled out of their trenches your son gallantly kept his platoon in their trenches for three hours till it was dark thereby hindering the advance of the Germans for a considerable time.” The letter proceeded.

His men wished to retire but as your Son had no orders to do so he kept them there and altogether behaved in a most gallant manner for which I have sent in his name to our Brigadier for mention in dispatches, and I know he has forwarded it on to higher authority.

Captain Trefusis continued, describing events that occurred on 6 November. He wrote…

we were again heavily attacked and had to again retire a few hundred yards owing to the French being driven back on our immediate right. About 4 p.m. I saw your Son leading his platoon again to the attack as we were ordered to drive the enemy out of a certain position. Almost immediately after he had passed me he was shot dead.

Tragically, the captain then informed the father that he was unable thus far to recover the body, but he tried to console the father, uttering “… in the end he met a gallant soldier’s death. All the Officers in his company are either killed or missing.” Another officer followed this up, stating,

82 Ibid., 63.
84 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid., 2.
“He was killed leading his men against the German trenches. Of the 35 that went with him none returned.”

Self-proclaimed Scotsman J. McLlwain chronicled, on 14 September, how he heard someone utter, “‘We’ll show them how the Irish can fight….”

McLlwain served with many Irish, as he wrote about some of his comrades. He noted how his comrade, Willie O’Brien, impressed him with his instinct and nighttime vision. Another Irishman received praise from J. McLlwain, when the latter recorded how a soldier named O’Hara helped him make it through the retreat.

O’Hara was a good fellow. During the retreat when, on one of my worst days, feeling I could go no further on the march I flung myself on the ground, O’Hara raised me up, carried my rifle, and with the help of others brought me along. We did the same for him shortly after, but with more trouble, for he was a big man.

O’Hara went on to become a company sergeant major, according to McLlwain.

The Scottish soldier continued to take note of the Irish, writing “the Irish have such a holy hatred of digging that only a supply of energetic and bullying officers could compel us to protect ourselves by improving the poor shelters we had…” On 11 November, McLlwain also provided an insightful account of a specific Irishman named Mick Keating, a regular from

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87 Ibid.
88 McLlwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.
89 Ibid., 31. He mentions a Limerick fellow named Mick and Willie O’Brien, who was a “fine soldier” and “the silent type of Irishman who had had a good schooling.” O’Brien had a father who was a schoolmaster at Belgooley, near Kinsale.
90 Ibid., 34.
91 Ibid., 17.
92 Ibid., 38.
Limerick. Keating was recently sentenced to seven days field punishment and loss of pay for the period for some misdemeanor “too trivial to remember.” McLlwain wrote more, stating

Mick Keating…

still brooding on his grievance became something of a [n]uisance. “Sure I’ve been punished myself, Mick,” said I. “What the hell’s the use of worrying. We might all be dead before night: what does it matter?” The melancholic recklessness of the remark suited his own mood. “It’s the injustice, and the bloody maneness of it,” he went on. “Oh, but what else would we expect? By putting on the bloody English uniform we are disgraced. We were told often enough, we’ve only ourselves to blame. An Irishman’s an outcast in this army. Despised by the English themselves; treated like dirt, and scorned by every dacent [sic] man and woman in our own country. Risking yer life for them, and the few skittering shillings you’re entitled to taken off ye for a paltry charge that’s no crime at all.”

McLlwain reflected on this event.

Often during the years of service in the regiment had I heard, with variations, these self reproachings. More than one Irishman, impatient with his fellow-countrymen, had declared, “We are a nation of ply-actors.” Mick was no doubt getting a melancholy satisfaction by dramatising the situation: making emotional capital from his self abasement.

Despite Keating’s disgust, McLlwain wrote that he still performed like a British regular when the Germans advanced on the Black Watch Regiment, forcing them to retreat.

[The] great bursts of fire and screams of delight brought us to the fire-step to a sight every infantry soldier dreams about. The Germans were lumbering over towards us just fifty yards away, in any order, bunching together, their objective, doubtless, being the shelter of the wood, beyond the altogether inadequate position vacated by our advanced troops. We poured rapid fire into them. Nine out of every ten were hit. The dead piled up in heaps. Notwithstanding, unwounded Germans did manage to dig into the soft ground and make shelter where the unfortunate Black Watch had been.

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93 Ibid., 37.
94 Ibid.
95 Ibid., 38.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid., 39.
McIlwain continued, noting the performance of the Limerick man, Mick Keating.

In the heat and noise of the conflict, and while my rifle was roasting hot, I became aware of Mick Keating roaring in my ear, “For the love o’ Jasus, sergeant, give me your rifle for me own is blocked entirely.” He had been firing like hell, killing Germans for England. “God blast and damn ye,” he yelled at the rifle, battering the breech with his bare hand, as if it were something alive and refractory. I took the rifle off him and gave him my own; I found his was choked with dirt, and wasted precious minutes clearing it. The captain then sent me along to report on the right flank. I was coming back to reassure him that all were in good form and cheerful when over came another wave of Germans.98

The Irish based regiment found themselves squaring off with not just any Germans, but the Prussian Guards themselves, “the cream of the Kaiser’s army.”99 Despite being wounded in the arm, McIlwain persevered, and his comrades did not allow the Germans to break through. His words described the feelings he felt.

The Germans that day made their biggest bid hitherto to break through the British line and had failed; stopped, not by barbed wire, artillery or machine guns, but by the steady, accurate and rapid individual marksmanship of the first army. Brigades of Prussian Guards had made the attack. Their casualties were terrific. Hundreds who had rushed into our lines were made prisoners, most of them wounded. The Kaiser himself was there and had made them a speech before their attack. For the tired, ragged, sleepless, lousey British infantry it was a great victory.100

This was not to suggest the different ethnic groups existed in perfect harmony. As an Irish lad from Cork, John F. Lucy noted while fighting at Mons that “All Irishmen are Mick to English soldiers.”101 Was this resentment or just a statement? Either way, resentment manifested itself on occasion. In one interesting account, Scotsman J. McIlwain described some of the

98 Ibid.

99 Ibid.

100 Ibid.

101 Lucy, 107.
underlying resentment that existed within the British army, and with that, the British nation.

Several horses fled in fright due to the sounds of war, and,

One of my lads had caught his horse and let it slip him again. At my quite natural remark, “Why the hell didn’t ye hould [sic] him when ye had him?”, the guardsmen, who, by turning about had a full view of the fields in their rear, saw the fun and got their laughs. I could see how they would retail [sic] the story of what the little sergeant of the “Micks” said. Every intelligent Irishman resents much more readily than the Scots being regarded as a comedian of the national type in the eyes of the good-humoured English spectator.  

What was worth noting was how J. McLlwain’s battalion, comprised mostly of Irish, basically ceased to exist by 13 November, by his own account. Though they were not from the island of Britain and though they felt conflicted by serving the British, they still fought, and fought, for many Irish, to their end. There was something to be said from that. As for the self-proclaimed Scotsman, J. McLlwain, he left the continent due to his wound and arrived in Newcastle on 27 November.

*The Ballad of John F. Lucy: A Long Way from Tipperary, Indeed!*  

On 3 January, 1912, a young Catholic Irish lad from Cork, who was “too young to shave…,” enlisted into the British Army. His name was John F. Lucy. He discussed the “why” to his decision.

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103 Ibid., 43.

104 Ibid., 44.

105 Lucy, 16, 21.

106 I chose John F. Lucy’s story to demonstrate the extent of which British nationalism influenced fighting. Lucy was a poor, Catholic Irishman from Cork who would be one of the least likely affected by “Britishness.” If the British nationalism influenced his person and his soldiery, then that should suggest the power of its composition and extent of its appeal.
The pre-war soldier, when asked why he enlisted, explained that one afternoon, while his mother was entertaining some casual friends in the peerage, he had the misfortune to spill his tea on the grand piano, and of course one could not expect his mother to put up with that kind of conduct.\textsuperscript{107}

Of course, that was only a ruse to the real answer.

If at the time of the question he was not in the inventive mood which produced this or similar fantasies he replied: ‘I’ listed for me pound.’ The soldier’s pound was his daily ration of army bread, and unemployment and the need of food had really driven him to the colours.\textsuperscript{108}

Did John F. Lucy provide the allusive answer to the question of soldiery? Was fighting simply a way to make a living? Was soldiering simply a way to survive? Was soldiery merely a job? If so, did the strength and power of nationalism prove to be all bark with no bite? These questions were not yet resolved.

Upon enlisting (with his brother Denis), Lucy felt no issue defending the symbol of Britain, the monarchy.

Avoiding the recruiting sergeant, because I objected to presenting myself to any of that bluff, florid beribboned type, we walked into the local barracks and took oath to serve and protect the King and his relations, and to obey the superiors set over us by him for a period of seven years with the colours and five in the reserve.\textsuperscript{109}

That was a bit tough to do for an Irishman, as the Cork lad noted. “We swore with some national qualms of conscience. As a sop to our feelings we chose an Irish regiment, and one stationed far away at the other end of Ireland.”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{107} Ibid., 13.

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{109} Ibid., 15.

\textsuperscript{110} Ibid.
On meeting other enlisted Irishmen, as Lucy and his brother soon discovered, variations of the idea of Irish were present even in the army.

They were sharp-featured and clothed in rags, and were all four fine specimens of corner boys. We approached them and exchanged information. Two of them hailed from Dublin and two from Belfast. The Belfast men called it ‘Bilfaust’.

We found it difficult to understand any of the four, and our accent seemed strange to them. They joked at us. One of the Belfast men had opened up the questioning by asking our names, and then asked with a fair imitation of our way of speaking: ‘Are you from Corrk?’ We answered: ‘We are, are you?’ This evidently was the stock answer of all Cork men, and was greeted with gusts of laughter.111

During training, the Cork lads also found, rather uncomfortably, that not all Irishmen behaved the same way, as Lucy described the deception of a bugler from Dublin.

He nearly poisoned us… by doping bread with some white powder he bought in the town. He was a drunkard and did not eat bread. He left his daily ration in the open barrack-room cupboard, instead of locking it away in his box, as was the custom with the hungry recruits. Our work was too hard for growing youths, and we devoured everything edible we could lay hands on. The bugler’s bread supplemented our soup issue every evening at eight o’clock, when he was usually out, boozing in the town.

He tried to discover the bread-stealers in order to make money by selling it, but none of us would confess, so he resorted to stern measures the effects of which kept six recruits galloping for hours out into a cold winter’s night, spurred on by the pangs of a violent and recurring diarrhoea. My brother and I were among the groaning runners.

A second coup by the same bugler forces his memory on me for ever.

On the evening of a certain pay-day he received a wire from Dublin telling him his mother had just died. He was distracted, and mournfully stalked the floor of the barrack-room, all the recruits commiserating with him. It was pathetic to see the tall strong soldier in sorrow. He slowly unfolded his best uniform and dressed in it. We all helped to polish up his boots, belt, and medals. We brushed his hat and clothes.

He told us he had got special leave, and was going at once to Dublin to attend the funeral, but he was very short of cash.

He actually wept. My heart warmed, melted, and flowed out over my comrades, each of whom had just received six or seven shillings pay. I started a subscription, and raised about eighteen hard-earned shillings for the orphan. He left us silently, and we went to bed discussing his hidden virtues.

Sorrow arouses godly feelings, and is a great bond.

The next morning we were startled by the notes of the ‘Rouse’ alarmingly near. Looking to a corner bed we saw our bereaved bugler, too drunk to get up, but

111 Ibid., 18.
conscientiously blowing his instrument out through an open window; with his legs and the lower part of his body still in bed. He would not give a single answer to any of our angry questions.112

What John Lucy found in the army was diversity, even amongst the Irish. There was not necessarily a loyalty to the Irish community, as the deceptive bugler demonstrated. A training corporal, who was Irish himself, also made this point clear, though his methods were perhaps for motivational purposes, as Lucy watched him do his job.

To allay our own disgust we took a perverse pleasure in watching the other squads doing their training. The corporal who dubbed us ‘diseased idiots’ operated on a party of recruits in our vicinity. ‘Diseased’ was his pet word.

He was diseased himself from regarding the quaint postures adopted by his disciples. He actually had a torso like a bull’s, and he swung his body about like a monkey.

Standing in a religious attitude he called on heaven to witness the iniquities of the sweepings of mankind in his hands: ‘This is too much for any bloody man. I wish to God I was dead, dead and out of me misery tachin’ swabs like yours. Have a look at yereselves, go on, go on, have a look at yereselves, and you,’ he roared at a drooping pupil, ‘you standing there like a drowned duck in the family way, where were you got? Merciful God, look at him. Where did you say? Donegal! Never in Ireland. We don’t projoos things like you. You’re not a man, you’re a mystery, a bloody awful mystery, a cross for me past sins.

‘For the love of our sufferin’ God have mercy, lads,’ he wheedled. ‘I’m only a poor old corporal, only nine years to go for pension. Let me live. I’m diseased, I’m bloody well diseased. Straighten your chicken chests a bit, can’t yeh, and let on to be swaddies just to give us a hand, or be the Lord God I’ll chuck this, and join a regiment for a change. I’ll join the lousiest English regiment I can find and soldier for a change instead of wet nursin’ diseased idiots....’ The he stage-whispered: ‘I’ll tell yeh what I’ll do. I’ll turn my back and you can walk out the bloody gate, and no questions asked. Bugger off. No one wants you, and no one’ll look for you except the diseased blind-eyed son of a bitch of a recruiting sergeant who enlisted you when he was in the rats, and he won’t be able to see you.’113

Differences existed between not just the Irish and English, but within the Irish themselves.

During a stint in London, Lucy noted, “Some of us found relief in trying to imitate the Cockney

112 Ibid., 27-8.

113 Ibid., 31-2.
porters and cabbies, and we came to the conclusion that the English were very bad at talking their own language.”114 He continued, demonstrating his own views about the differences amongst the Irish. “Thus the southern Irish. The Belfast Scots were more silent than usual thinking of the heaps of money to be made in London, and the good jobs going there.”115

Lucy’s developing attitudes toward his comrades continued, and he exposed those attitudes. During a parade one day while training,

…we suffered the limit of boredom listening to the Cockney schoolmaster, as he juggled with h’s, k’s, and g’s, and dictated the rivers and towns of England, or expounded the magic of the decimal point. All the scholars were lumped together, complete illiterates and past pupils of the Christian Brothers. Some of us could have taught our schoolmaster, but had learned to be humble. The north of Ireland men were frightfully ignorant, and slow and stupid in the schoolroom. They compared badly with the men from other parts of Ireland, who invariably had had some scrap of education, and were not worried by the simple Army School tasks, but the northerners more than made up for their failing in these abstruser matters by being slick and smart on the barrack-square.116

Other Irishmen from the south were not at polite, as the soldier from Cork wrote.

One evening, as I was strolling towards the Munster lines, I met one of them, slightly intoxicated, making for our barracks. He had the fixed eye and smiling mouth of an Irishman with a purpose. I stopped him. ‘What cheer, Dirty-Shirt. Where are you going?’

His soft cork accent sounded like music in my ears. ‘Yerra, I’m only goin’ down to have a look at the Belfast min.’ I did not like the look of him, and took the advantage of lapsing into his way of speaking: ‘Is it wan of our fellahs yeh know, that yer wanting te see?’ ‘Ah no. Sure I know nun of ‘um, but’, and he leaned towards me, whispering, ‘is it true dat deres Orangemun in your mob?’

‘Divil an Orangemun,’ I lied. ‘What would we be doin’ wid Orangemun in the army?’

‘Is dat a fact now, is dat a fact? Well, I heard different from wan of our blokes—young Paddy Flaherty. He’s a great scholar, and he said ‘twas stinkin’ wid ‘um, and their masons an’ lodges and all.’

‘Can they fight?’ he shouted abruptly.

114 Ibid., 53.
115 Ibid.
116 Ibid., 42-3.
Could they fight? I thought, could they not! One of them had just knocked me out. They were as hardy and truculent as any Cork man, and as willing to meet trouble. ‘What are ye talkin’ about?’ I said. ‘The only Orangeman I heard tell of are in Belfast. Have sinse like a good man. Yeh wouldn’t be creatin’ trouble now, would yeh, between two good Irish regiments?’

Lucy was able to take the more intolerant soldier’s mind off the issue for a while, and walked him back to the barracks. Eventually, his mind returned to the matter, and…

…stopping, with that droll, slow deliberation of the sons of Bacchus, he warned me solemnly: ‘I’m givin’ yeh advice,’ said he, ‘a nice young fella like you. Keep out o’ trouble in the army. Have nothin to do wid de likes of Paddy Flaherty. Mischief-makers they are. Aye, mischief-makers and drunkards, the whole seed an’ breed of um, and ‘tis dat kind dat might have landed me in de clink dis very day.’

Not only did Lucy gain insight into the Irish dilemma while stationed in Ulster, he also provided insight to those interested in nationalism and its effects.

The commercial northern garrison town was a strange place to us. Slogans: ‘To hell with the Pope’, and ‘No Rome rule’, were white-washed on the gable ends of the houses in the poorer districts. Bigotry reigned here, surviving ironically in Ireland’s quarter of progress. Most of the inhabitants were millworkers. They were undersized and underfed, but dressed extravagantly, and boasted of the amount of money made in their town. We saw with regret that some Catholics living here seemed just as much embittered as their Protestant neighbours. This was foreign and galling to men of the south, who are friendly and tolerant towards their Protestant countrymen. They have produced many of their national leaders, and their standards of respectability and upright conduct are much admired by us, and made use of too, because they possess a civic spirit which permits them to lead or be led, without bickering, for the common good.

The Irish Catholic lad from Cork looked past the religious turmoil and conflict in Ireland and advocated tolerance and civic virtue. He supported accepting the differences in society while embracing a civil society that would serve the common good. Were not these ideas central

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117 Ibid., 69-70.
118 Ibid., 70-1.
119 Ibid., 46.
components of British nationalism? Was John Lucy demonstrating an essence of “Britishness” in his writing?

This was not the last Lucy alluded to the components of British nationalism. “At the end of six months we were trained recruits.”\textsuperscript{120} Shortly afterwards, he went on a trip.

In due course our squad was drafted from the depot to the home-service battalion, stationed in England. We were exhorted on a last parade to remember our pride in arms, and in our regiment, and sensitive to this teaching we saw ourselves as protectors of the British Empire and the champions of the courage of all soldiers of our race.\textsuperscript{121}

“Protectors of the British Empire!” “Champions of the courage of all soldiers of our race.” Did Lucy mean the “Irish” race or “British” race? It appeared unclear, but the fact that it appeared unclear supported the notion the British nationalism was clearly influential, even in Ireland. Lucy possibly felt exactly that upon seeing London and Londoners for the first time, “…and we felt our new importance as the bodyguard of these strange people unjustly neglected.”\textsuperscript{122} To Lucy, a bond existed between he, a southern, Catholic Irishman from Cork, and the inhabitants of London, prominently English and Protestant. Was this not what artist Sir David Wilkie imagined when he painted \textit{Chelsea Pensioners Reading the Gazette of the Battle of Waterloo}?

Rivalry existed within the army. But, it was not necessarily the rivalry one expected.

An English regiment stationed outside the fort was our old and sworn enemy for some obscure reason. This was a great nuisance, as it interfered with one of our few recreations, that of walking out in the town. The heavy leather waist-belts were often used as weapons, when blows were exchanged between our Irishmen and the English. A nasty business, as the buckle end of a belt can cut a man about badly. To make it worse, our people were very pugnacious, and would never accept defeat, and when fights did not go in their favour secret messages arrived quickly in barracks and fetched out

\textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 49.

\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
reinforcements. The Englishmen in our regiment forgot nationality and beat up their own countrymen in the supposed defence of the honour of their chosen corps.\footnote{Ibid., 59.}

The rivalry was regimental, not ethnic at all.

There was pride in Lucy’s words when he wrote about the possibility of war in 1914, and that pride directed itself toward the British Army.

Events outside the army hardly concerned us at all. International affairs were beyond the professional soldier. We were ignorant and uninterested until, at the end of the summer, the war-clouds gathered over Europe. Then there was no reasoning. Our job was to fight. We were well trained and willing to fight any foreigner, and we were delighted at the prospect of war and glory.

The British Army in 1914 was more used to battle than that of any other nation. It possessed the highest and bravest traditions that can be engendered in a fighting force, and its experience of wars was such that our own regiment, though a young one in the army, had so many battle honours that they were difficult to memorize.

Our state of mind was peculiar to our task. We despised all foreigners, and only wanted them at the end, the business end, of our snappy little Lee-Enfields. We had great \textit{élan} and great hopes. At first we could not follow the trend of events on the Continent. Whom were we to fight? French, Russians, Germans? What did it matter? A dose of that rapid fire of ours, followed by an Irish bayonet charge would soon fix things.\footnote{Ibid., 73.}

Lucy felt the honor of being part of the British Army. He also inferred that the English, Scottish, and Welsh were not “foreigners” at all. He reserved that term for non-British people. The bond was present, even enough to accept a mislabel from time to time, as Lucy noted after arriving on the continent: “Crowds of people hemmed us in, running beside us, and even breaking our ranks, and all cheering: ‘Vivent le Anglais’—a rousing reception to my mind…”\footnote{Ibid., 82.}

Still, the bond of British nationalism had limits with the Irish. While informed about a speech the commanding officer gave to stir up the men, Lucy noted the response from some of the Irish men. “The Irish did not feel that their country had much at stake in this business, and
that kind of speech raised only critical or cynical feelings.” 126 While marching forward to the frontier, Lucy admitted some impressions he received. The French people “…disappointed some of us by thinking that Ireland was in some part of England; yet we found traces of Irish descent in the names of some of the French farmers. One such called himself ‘O’Breen’. I do not know how he spelt it.” 127 Even the mislabeling of English for Irish had its limits for Lucy while marching through Maubeauge.

French poilus swarmed along the streets and in the roads about the town to watch us pass, and they cheered us to the echo: ‘Vivent le Anglais.’ For my company I gaily corrected them: ‘Nous ne sommes pas Anglais, nous sommes Irlandais.’ They liked that and laughed with pleasure, and then shouted: ‘Vivent les Irlandais,’ and we cheered back at them: ‘Vive la France.’ 128

The bottom line, however, was though there were limits to the bonds of “Britishness” for John Lucy, he still fought for Britain. He fought for the British nation. He was wounded for it. 129 He believed enough in the British nation that he continued to serve in the British Army, reaching the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in 1942 and eventually appointed Officer in the Order of the British Empire in 1945. 130 He was a professional soldier, and the ideas of “Britishness” existed in his writing and his experience.

126 Ibid., 77.
127 Ibid., 90.
128 Ibid., 97.
129 Ibid., 392.
130 Ibid., xii.
The Limits

That was not to say that the influence of the British version of nationalism was omnipresent. The British Empire was substantial, and it included a wide variety of peoples. Despite the power of British nationalism and its emphasis on the civic and freedom, the government and peoples of Great Britain and Ireland were still products of their time. They did not necessarily view the peoples of the empire the same way they viewed themselves, and hints of those perceptions were present amongst the British soldiers. Soldiers from India contributed to the British cause, but were not afforded the respect from the British soldiers. Lieutenant Rowland H. Owen, from “Huddfd” in Yorkshire, noted in a letter to his father on 1 November,

We have mucked in with the Indians now. Last night I was much amused by the sight of a long string of Sikhs going along the road in v. bright moonlight at about 6 miles an hr., some of them limping rather – Ghurkas walk like our little cat on the other hand – in fact the two reminded me of those two.131

Major St. John voiced his thoughts when he wrote about his men being relieved by a battalion of Ghurkas in late October. He stated,

…our relief came along headed by the Englishman who was followed by a crowd of little boys. The Ghurka is only about 4 foot nothing in his socks and on this occasion as I learnt afterwards his small stature combined with bad staff work was his undoing for no sooner had we left than the Germans attacked and the poor little men being too small to see over the parapet were scuppered and 400 of them killed. We were not warned till too late that we were to be relieved by Ghurkas or told to build up a firing platform for them. This incident is a good one to show what a danger a staff officer is who neglects the smallest detail.132

Non-European peoples did not receive the same tolerance as the “civilized” Europeans, and “Britishness” showed its limitations.


Conclusion

Maybe Londoner Lieutenant G. A. Loyd made a powerful statement while writing about the action at Ypres on 5 November. The fighting was fierce, and with that, the idea of the British nation may never have been more complete.

Units have become so mixed from the incessant strengthening of the line, and the constant moving of small units from one part of the line to another as attack after attack was launched against it by the enemy, that I have lost a knowledge of where the different battalions and even some of the brigades are now placed.\textsuperscript{133}

Britons fought to the point where there was no distinction between the different groups, ethnicities, and identities. The British soldiers fought, even if it meant the end. Lt. Loyd alluded to this.

The vigorous and extraordinarily gallant attacks, defences, and actions of the various battalions have followed in such close order and all movements carried out with such speed that it has been difficult to gather a coherent account or to verify information. All the battalions of the Guards Brigade, after stubborn gallantry almost unparalleled, are now reduced, on an average, to a quarter of their strength.\textsuperscript{134}

The Londoner went on to write that his division, the 1\textsuperscript{st} Division, “has lost so heavily that it is in course of being withdrawn from the line.”\textsuperscript{135} The next day, he mentioned how the 1\textsuperscript{st} Coldstream from the 1\textsuperscript{st} Brigade was a “shattered remnant.”\textsuperscript{136} The “K.R.R” now consisted of a “mere handful of men.”\textsuperscript{137} The tragedy was that it would eventually lead to the end, at least, to the end of the original British force that consisted of regular British soldiers. The year 1915 basically

\textsuperscript{133} Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 68.
\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Ibid., 69.
saw to that. Those British soldiers represented Haldane’s vision of a “nation of arms.” It was only fitting that English, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish all played a role in these units to which Lt. Loyd referred.
Soldiery required many components for success. Training and camaraderie brought forth a sense of professionalism with the British soldiers that allowed them to deal with the obstacles of war. These hindrances included the British Expeditionary Force’s questionable artillery and artillery command. Those obstacles also consisted of fear and hardships. Discipline was strict for the soldier, as punishment occurred. Discipline was a necessity in order to be effective at killing the enemy. The British soldier carried on as best as he could, demonstrating not only humor during the ordeal, but heroism as well. This was the path of the British soldier.

If culture factored into the path, then nationalism influenced the soldiers of Great Britain. With this connection, how a soldier fought represented his culture of nationalism. The British version of nationalism stressed concepts of the Enlightenment, such as liberalism, individuality, and toleration. With the correlation of nationalism and soldiery, the effectiveness of the soldier mirrored the qualities of the nationalism. The British soldier met the obstacles of fighting. How they reacted demonstrated their capacity for soldiery as well as the qualities of their nationalism. The British soldiers of 1914, in their words, demonstrated an overall effectiveness of soldiery. If the soldier was effective, would that not mean that the type of nationalism was effective as well?

Preparing for War

As John F. Lucy, the “British” Irishman, alluded to earlier, many men joined the army for the money. F. M. Packham, writing down his memoirs at age seventy-four, recalled why he joined.1 At the age of sixteen, he was working in construction in London, but he felt the money

1 Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.
was better in the army. Thus, in 1912, he enlisted and eventually served in both the 3rd and 2nd Battalions, Royal Sussex.

Once enlisted, training was the order of the day. John F. Lucy noted how training helped contributed in his development as a soldier.

‘If you broke your mothers’ hearts, you won’t break mine.’ A tall, lithe, elastic-muscled English sergeant put us through it. He demonstrated every exercise himself first in a completely effortless manner, and bounced about as if on springs. He taught us good manners too. ‘Good morning, Class.’ Good morning, Staff.’ His hand-clap, two rapid explosions, brought any defaulter to ‘shun’ and ‘Round that post and back, Dubbul.’

Lucy continued, and described the extent of training.

Punishment immediately followed crime. Our bodies ached. A whisper in the ranks, and the exercises ceased. The hand-clap paralysed us to attention. The most painful exercise was chosen as a corrective: ‘On the hands down, arms bend, stretch, bend, stretch, bend, stretch, stick that backside down, you’re not a bloody camel.’ A strong rubber-soled shoe pushes the offending part into alinement and the strain continues, while a sharp pain, half physical, half mental, gnaws at the back of the head: ‘Bend, stretch, bend, stretch…’ for an interminable period. Then back like a shot to our interrupted exercise: ‘In front of the beam, double!’ The fellow was diabolical. We hated him, and aped his manners and way of speech in the security of our barrack-room. It was a rotten life, and we were very, very sorry for having enlisted.

Marksmanship was a key component of soldiery, especially for the British. F. M. Packham recalled his rifle training. While operating his Lee Enfield Rifle 303 on the “famous Bisley Rifle Range,” he knew how special the British regulars were at shooting. “It was here where we first

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid. The reader may be interested to know that his platoon sergeant, a G. W. Hutson, competed in track and field in the 1912 Olympics in Stockholm, Sweden. Hutson, according to Packham, held the world record for the Three-Mile Race.

4 Lucy, 30.

5 Ibid., 30-1.

6 Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.
fired the famous fifteens per minute rapid fire. I was a good shot but not good enough to get the Marksman’s Badge.”

    Even though the army command tried to train their troops and prepare them for combat, some of their efforts failed to an extent. F. M. Packham recalled one such effort. “We were shown pictures of German Soldiers, but the pictures had no resemblance to the Germans we were to see in Battle.” Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Kempthorne noted how during the advance to the Belgian frontier, men already started falling out toward the end of the march forward, and three cases of heat stroke occurred within his brigade.

    Other methods attempted to ensure the health of the regulars and protect their personals. Inoculation was a common experience for the soldiers as the army command saw to preparing them for the war. Sometimes, however, the soldiers did not have the desired reaction. Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Kempthorne, a Cornwall man, discussed how many troops had severe reactions to the inoculation due to “the necessarily large single dose…” along with the “discomfort of overcrowded barracks and the weight of the equipment.” Another issue involved the refusal of inoculation. The British Army did not compel the men to take the

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    7 Ibid.

    8 Ibid., 3.

    9 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.


    11 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
medicine, so some men did refuse.\textsuperscript{12} Unfortunately for the surviving soldiers, the protection of their personal property was less successful, as F. M. Packham remembered,

> All other clothing etc was to be packed in our Kit-bag, which would be kept in safe keeping until our return from overseas. I often wondered what became it [sic], especially as most of it was my own personal property. While I was serving [sic] on the Somme battlefield, one of the replacements noticed my regimental number, and he told me that he was issued with a pair of trousers that had my number on them, I knew then what had happened to my belongings.”\textsuperscript{13}

It was not just physical training that contributed to effective soldiery for the British regular, but also the development of community and attachment to one’s surrounding soldiers. A sense of camaraderie developed for the British, as John F. Lucy recollected: “We begin to have a queer affection for all those comrades of ours, an even talk admiringly of the N.C.O.s. We meet our physical training instructor. ‘Good evening, Sergeant.’ ‘Evening, lads. Don’t get into trouble.’ ‘No fear, Sergeant.’”\textsuperscript{14} What transformed was a motley group of men turning into a community.

This was evident in the words of John F. Lucy.

> A battalion is like a little town, and viewed in this way has many attractions. The seven or eight hundred men and the thirty or so officers are not solely and at all times engaged in training for war. Working hours are not long, and holidays are numerous. A duty soldier, that is, one fully trained, may ease his boredom by finding employment in various stores and workshops, by looking after horses, by making himself expert in specialized jobs like machine-gunnery or signaling, or by educating himself in the regimental school. While still in the army he may become, among other things, a cook, a waiter, a valet, a clerk, a butcher, an armourer, or a storekeeper, if he so wishes. He may also compete for promotion.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12} Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4. Lt. Loyd, however, was not one to refuse, as he took a second dose. Of course, he conceded that he became ill from the inoculation.

\textsuperscript{13} Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 3.

\textsuperscript{14} Lucy, 41.

\textsuperscript{15} Lucy, 56.
Despite the differences between the southern Irish and their northern neighbors, camaraderie developed, still. John F. Lucy recalled that feeling years later: “And to-day we southerners, who have fought side by side with the northern men in their own regiments, and who warmly remember their bravery and precious comradeship, heartily damn the righteous ones who earn haloes by fermenting ill blood.”\(^{16}\) The feeling of camaraderie became paramount for the soldiers. J. McLlwain demonstrated this idea at the Battle of Ypres, writing,

>This was my first experience of being as indifferent as ever about my own skin but much concerned about the fate of the army. Which was foolish on my part; taking upon my shoulders the weight of responsibilities of people higher up for a situation I could not help.\(^{17}\)

If that camaraderie was violated, the soldiers would react, as John F. Lucy did after his battalion and section were reorganized following the Battle of Nueve Chappelle. He recalled how “…in a brief fit of renunciation and despair I burned my diary, the writing of which though destroyed, helped me to remember most of what I have recorded here.”\(^{18}\) The reason for the reshuffle, as even Lucy admitted, was the loss of manpower in the battalion. Lucy himself discovered that by November 1914, only four corporals out of thirty-two within his battalion were still alive.\(^{19}\) His own section of eight men now contained only two.\(^{20}\)

Camaraderie played an important role in the success of the British soldier, but against the superior numbers of the German army, the “Old Contemptibles” needed all the help they could

\(^{16}\) Lucy, 46.

\(^{17}\) McLlwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 36.

\(^{18}\) Lucy, 267.

\(^{19}\) Ibid., 246.

\(^{20}\) Ibid., 267.
get. This was the purpose of artillery. The British incorporated artillery within the army to support its soldiers. Yet, a select few believed the British artillery lacked substance, the majority of the professionals provided praise. Artillery fire played no small role in 1914, and to resist the German advance, the BEF needed it to be effective. As B. C. Myatt observed in his diary, modern artillery was a devastating force: “This war is getting beyond human endurance. This modern artillery is awful. Human beings cannot stand such shock.” The British artillery often gave its best effort in producing this devastating force. One anonymous Tommie made this point when he described a situation at Mons

> It was soon reported that in the wood there were something like 15 thousand Germans including some of their finest troops, the Imperial Guards, and the Uhlans, and to keep that lot a bay, we had only the 9th Brigade, consisting of the Royal Fus, Lincolns, Regt Scots Fus, and Northumberlands but we had the Royal Field Artillery with us, and I don’t think our Gunners had earned more honour for themselves as they did on that job, known as the Battle of Mons.

J. W. Palmer recorded in his diary the effectiveness of the British artillery at the Battle of Mons, stating,

> From news to hand, the position is excellent. The 3rd Division have had a field day. They have disposed of 8,000 of the enemy. This was read out to us as official. A Company of the Lancasters were said to have been surrounded but 60 of them cut their way out. Was ordered to accompany the Colonel to a ridge, we spotted a column of German cavalry, the 116 battery dealt with them. Two shells only were fired. Two shells found the target. What grand estimate of range. What a thrilling sight too. The enemy column were out of range in quick time, the only trace remaining being a few dark forms on the ground. First blood to our side.

At the Battle of the Aisne, Lieutenant G. A. Loyd also noted the ability of the British artillery.

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21 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

22 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

At 5 p.m., by pre-arranged signal, every available battery heavy, field and howitzer that the I and II. Divisions possessed, commenced a bombardment of the enemy’s gun positions along the Chemin des Dames from near Courtecon westwards, consisting of about 80 guns as counted by the special aeroplane reconnaissance. I joined some of the Div. Staff upon the hill beside us, Col. Percival, Gort among them. All agreed that as an artillery duel it was the finest they had seen.

The reason given for it was because for two or more days we had let the enemy have more or less their own way, dropping their shells where they wished. Finally Gen. Gough and Hay decided to give them a taste of British cannon to serve the three purposes of showing that our guns were still active, to cause a demoralizing effect upon the hostile guns, and if possible to damage them.

They fired for 20 minutes gradually quickening up to 5 minutes rapid after which the howitzers opened with Lyddite for ten minutes upon the enemy’s infantry trenches.24 From this, the battery staff of the 1st Army Corps captured approximately fifty Germans and two machine guns according to Lt. Loyd.25

During the beginnings of the Battle of Ypres on 19 October, one Major B. T. St. John applauded the British artillery. He felt the Germans would attack on the left, so he informed a gunner, “who put a few shrapnel among them and I was able to see a lot of them lying where they fell.”26 Lieutenant G. A. Loyd also observed effective artillery at Ypres, stating, “Our artillery was observed to make good shooting.”27

Still, some of the British soldiers felt they were on the short end of the proverbial matchstick in this regard. This was, however, through no fault of the British regular. Lt.-Col. G. A. Kempthorne alluded to this point on 24 August at Mons as he saw a British machine gunner firing, “…with the greatest coolness and gallantry. It was obviously only a matter of time before he would be knocked out. He was mortally wounded in the groin just as I came up. Even then it

25 Ibid., 28.
was with some difficulty I could persuade him to let me help him to the rear.” He continued, expressing the frustration of being on the short end.

We seemed not to have a gun to reply to the enemy’s batteries…. Then two of our guns came into action right in the open at our left rear – two against many. They did their best, but never found the German batteries. One gun was still there at the end of the day – the subaltern’s body resting on his gun with the head blown off, and his gunners lying dead round him.

A member of the field battery since 1911, Major C. L. Brereton saw firsthand the issues of the British artillery. He arrived at Le Havre on 23 August, and was, therefore, not part of the fighting at Mons. He was, however, part of the retreat. It was during the retreat that he noticed the gloom within the artillery staff: “The Staff were no apparently quite resigned to their fate. We were told that we should be attacked very soon and must be prepared to die where we were.”

The gloominess continued for Major Brereton when a fellow soldier, “…gave me the cheery information that the Huns were close on us, and that we should be probably all killed in the Forest.” During the fighting at Mons, Major J. L. Mowbray of the 2nd Division made a simple observation: “Today our artillery made several mistakes.”

Did problems with British artillery involve the command? Artillery officer, Major C. L. Brereton, thought so.

28 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

29 Ibid.

30 See Major C. L. Brereton, 86/30/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

31 Ibid., 1.

32 Ibid., 7.

33 Ibid., 9-10.

34 Ibid., 4.
Found General Hunter-Weston and Staff just having some tea in which I joined. The General told me that we were going to cross the MARNE at 6.30 p.m. and wanted all the Artillery support that he could get. Told him I only had one section [the others in another area], and could not possibly get the rest of the Artillery back by that time. Struck me he hardly knew what he was talking about.  

He continued expressing his frustration with the commanding officer, when he pointed out, …what looked like a section of guns on the North side of the River, at about 1800 yards range. It was getting dark, and I could not see very well, but did what looked like very good shooting. There were some Infantry just to the right of these retiring up the hill. I left these alone as they did not appear to be hindering our crossing of the river. Was much applauded by the East Lancs. For my shooting. Discovered next day that these “guns” must have been two bushes, and the Infantry were our own. In fact, we were across the river when General Hunter-Weston had given me my orders. I wounded two of our men and killed a German prisoner.  

To top it all off, the next day, on 10 September, his commanding staff sent his men to the wrong place. Major Brereton became so sure of the incompetence of his superiors, that he wagered on it. He told a comrade, “I bet you anything they send us to the wrong place again tonight’. Sure enough….” On 13 September, command made another error, as Major Brereton recorded:  

We were told to entrench ourselves back by the AISNE. Major Short suggested we should take up a good position South of the AISNE, but for reasons of “morale’ this was not allowed. In the pitch dark we deposited our guns in the open plain just North of the AISNE. A very feeble effort to dig ourselves in, as we were all too tired, and then lay down wet and exhausted. I looked at our position and then said to Lock “What a terrible place to put us; we will catch it all right tomorrow.  

Major Brereton was apparently correct about the mistake command made on this matter, as the next day, he wrote about it.


36 Ibid., 18.

37 Ibid., 19.

38 Ibid., 20. They were sent to the wrong place.

39 Ibid., 22.
We had just got the order to advance again to support the infantry attack, and had sent for our wagons, when the first shell came along. In about 5 minutes the Huns had completely got the range, and we were fairly “for it”. Suffered 29 casualties and knocked out most of his and Loch’s detachments.40

Fortunately for Major Brereton, he would not have to put up with his command’s poor decisions much longer. He received a transfer to the Belgian Legion on 6 October.41

If the British artillery as well as command did have weaknesses, the reviews were still negative even after the initial fighting. Major J. L. Mowbray noted a weakness within the artillery on 2 October:

> It is quite clear that artillery of a division require much more effective communication arrangements than we have. There should be a signal company or a section of a signal company allotted for this purpose and able to provide at least 4 Stations with several miles of wire. C.R.A. would thus be able to communicate direct with his brigades, and fire could be rapidly controlled. Present arrangement by communication through infantry brigades is most unsatisfactory – many delays, with often entirely nullifying value of messages, opportunities being lost.42

B. C. Myatt, a member of the artillery, noted in his diary on 15 October, that, “Our heavy howitzers are firing over us. They are out of our range, thousands killed.”43 Even during the Battle of Ypres. J. W. Palmer, who gave the British artillery a good review earlier at Mons, provided his updated analysis of the British guns, writing that they, “Might as well use pea-shooters as what we have at present.”44 Another British soldier, J. McLlwain also described his frustration.

40 Ibid., 22-3.

41 See Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

42 Mowbray, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32.

43 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

The lack of machine guns on our side was simply tragic. Nor was it much compensated for by a plentiful supply of S.A. ammunition in the hands of the finest quick-firing marksmen in the world. So deadly was our individual fire the Germans found it difficult to believe we suffered such lack of machine guns. In our battalion we had no such armaments. All ours had been captured on the 26th August, and we had to borrow from other units each time we went into the line.  

Major J. L. Mowbray also felt the supplies were lacking when he noted on 25 October how,

“Certain shortage in 18 pr. And 4.5 lyddite ammunition; our arrangements do not contemplate battles lasting a month! Most inconvenient at this time.”

Maybe, French assistance helped. Lieutenant G. A. Loyd alluded to this idea, writing,

French and English artillery acted in concert throughout the day, batteries being so closely packed that several could find no place and were forced to come into action from a position in rear. The result was a bombardment of extraordinary rapidity and soon gave us a superiority over the German guns, several guns being directly hit and many others being placed out of action.

One common theme within the personal accounts of the British soldiers involved their belief that they were an effective fighting body. Yet, once war began, problems arose. Certain British soldiers argued that the commanding officers contributed to these problems. Major B. T. St. John suggested as much when he received orders on 25 October during the Battle of Ypres.

“My instructions were hurried and rather muddled but I was told to do with them and not waste time so I set off, feeling anything but satisfied.” He continued expressing his frustration when, on the next day, he… “went back to the rendes-vous to find that my Company had been moved

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46 Mowbray, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 45.


by some silly ass who had not left word to where they had gone.”

J. W. Palmer felt the command acted too callously at times when he described one commanding officer, who basically sentenced a soldier to doom by not allowing the soldier into his own dugout. J. McLlwain also grew annoyed by the commanding officers due to the unnecessary drilling, bullying, and fatigue occurring when he wrote about 6 October, stating, “But the annoyance of the rank and file is at the spasmodic nature of the discipline: its erratic operation. It would be tiresome to go into details about “duty struck” officers and warrant officers.”

For other British troops, however, the command aided their plight. During the Battle of Ypres (specifically at Langemarck), Lieutenant G. A. Loyd relayed this belief.

The Germans delivered a very strong attack upon our left and continued to press with vigour against the British forces opposed to them on the Lys. Their attack upon our left was repulsed as the 1st Corps came up into line, although a delay in completing this movement nearly caused the complete collapse of the 22nd Brigade under Gen. Lawford round Zonnebeke, which lost heavily in men from frontal and flank attacks and at one moment nearly left the field in disorder. If it had not been for the consummate coolness of the General himself, this might have happened. By evening this Brigade was driven through and out of Zonnebeke.

Jim Woodhead, a sapper, also bestowed praise onto the commanding officers.

Now just a word or praise for our Generals & Staff for the way in which they manoeuvred the troops it was absolutely marvelous one could hardly credit it, one would never had thought they were on a retirement the splendid organisation & discipline amongst the troops was most splendid, of course natural enough the German thought that we had played our last cards but thank God we still had a trump card left & knew how to play it, now I guess it will surprise you to know how many miles we covered on that great retirement the distance was 263 mile in 14 days from Sunday 23rd Aug to Saturday 5th of Sept an average of just over 19 miles per days not bad marching, eh, & fighting

49 Ibid., 31.


rearguard in between, so once again thanks to the generalship of our Staff & the fitness of our little contemptible army.53

The Experience of Battle

Entering the military and participating in war were two separate events. As the war came, British regulars reacted. Lieutenant R. H. Owen pondered the idea of war shortly before its dawn in a letter, writing, “I think I am quite looking forward to this war, tho’ in the evenings, later on when I am absolutely fed up, I can look forward to nothing at all with any particular brightness. Anyway nothing could be more frightful than the existence here now.”54 Lieutenant Owen spoke too soon. The “baptism by fire” was soon to come, and how combatants reacted to that event depended on soldiery.

The most effective soldiers faced the obstacles of battle. Fear was one such obstacle. While one regular, John F. Lucy, crossed the channel to war, he pondered the idea of what was to come.

…I tried to think what war meant. I remembered with horror an actual photograph of British dead in a trench at Spion Kop, shown me some years before by a curio collector. A vivid picture of corpses with dark faces.

The detail of one man’s sock stuck in my memory, a green army sock in which one could see the pattern of the knitting. I was wearing such socks now. A feeling of nausea came over me….55

How to get over one’s fear was a major concern. It was soldiery that had to take over. One anonymous Tommie noted how soldiery took over. When word reached he and his men,

…that the Germans were thickly massed in a wood about three miles away. we at once started to dig trenches along the road as best we could. It was a fine Sunday morning and

53 J. Woodhead, 80/25/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 7-8.

54 Owen, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 5.

55 Lucy, 76.
we did not dream how soon it was to be a blazing town with thousands of dead and wounded lying about it.”

An anonymous British regular also described the opening engagement when he wrote, “It was about 12 o’clock when this fight was worse, it was Hell let loose, the noise of the guns and rifles of both sides was terrible, I saw quite well the German shrapnel bursting over the Northumberlands Fus, they were absolutely blown to pieces.”

For the British, soldiery had to supersede fear. Once the British soldiers heard the first shots, the anticipation became obvious. John F. Lucy discovered this and noted, “I mused, collected and inspected my feelings, and examined my conscience. I said a few prayers to make up for my missed Mass, and for our protection in any coming ordeal, and then in a proper frame of mind found all well and healthy.” Once the shots traveled across the wind, the British troops welcomed them with enthusiasm, as Lucy recalled.

A queer, thrilling, and menacing sound about which there were many conjectures, the most popular being that they were French seventy-fives, and that they were giving the Germans hell.

This notion greatly depressed us. We should really hurry up now, otherwise we would miss the battle. The French would get all the glory, while we, with our capacity for deadly rifle-fire and dash in the attack, would miss that crowning moment of victory, culminating in a sweeping bayonet charge, relentless and invincible—the grand assault that would drive the enemy off the field.

So we damned the French for not waiting for us…

Soon afterwards, the British needed not to “damn the French” because the Germans were upon them as well. It was at Mons where these professional soldiers received their trial by fire

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56 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

57 Ibid.

58 Lucy, 108.

59 Ibid., 109.
for World War I. As John F. Lucy, who had not seen actual combat until that moment, remembered, it was an impressive event.

For us the battle took the form of well-ordered, rapid rifle-fire at close range, as the field-grey human targets appeared, or were struck down. The enemy infantry advanced, according to one of our men, in ‘columns of masses’, which withered away under the galling fire of the well-trained and coolly led Irish-men. The leading Germans fired standing, ‘from the hip’, as they came on, but their scattered fire was ineffective, and ignored. They crumpled up---mown down as quickly as I tell it, their reinforcing waves and sections coming on bravely and steadily to fall over as they reached the front line of slain and wounded. Behind the death line thicker converging columns were being blown about by our field-guns.

Our rapid fire was appalling even to us, and the worst marksman could not miss, as he had only to fire into the ‘brown’ of the masses of the unfortunate enemy, who on the fronts of two of our companies were continually and uselessly reinforced at the short range of three hundred yards. Such tactics amazed us, and after the first shock of seeing men slowly and helplessly falling down as they were hit, gave us a great sense of power and pleasure. It was all so easy.60

Captain L. A. Kenny, of the 47th Battery, 44th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery, 2nd Division, 1st Army Corps, described the actions of his men once they heard gunfire at Mons when he wrote, “Our men were in good heart and sang songs and hymns in very subdued voices.”61

Lieutenant-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe also accounted for the effective soldiery when he and his men experienced their first trial by fire at Mons.

By this time there were crowds of splinters and shrapnel bullets in the air, and the men were digging little holes for themselves to sit in and most of them were getting a bit jumpy, not being used to such living; so we couldn’t afford to do much ducking (although it is difficult not to do it instinctively) or it would have made them worse.62

60 Ibid., 114.

61 Kenny, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 3. Though it is unclear where Captain Kenny originated, his nephew lived in Epsom, Surrey.

H. Spencer also described what he saw and experienced during the initial trial by fire at Mons on 24 August.

At 3 a.m. we were prepared for anything but we did not expect masses and masses of Germans. Our artillery (not very strong) opened rapid fire. The Germans were only about three or four hundred yards away and were advancing on us by thousands. Thousands must have fallen from our firing. This was a hard day’s battle. The Germans got range of our artillery and soon little of it was left altho’ every shell found its mark. We struggled on as long as we could: some of the men almost went mad. A regiment on our right charged but very few men were left to come back. Our lines were thinning out. The Germans were out-numbering us but still our rapid fire held them back for a time…. After 5 hours’ hard fighting we had to fall back again. Then the street fighting began. The Germans as fighters were no fools and much bigger than we. We blockaded the streets, took up the curbstones to put across the roads for head cover. The German artillery didn’t give us much rest…. At 2 p.m. the Germans were house to house with us. Orders were given either to clear the Germans out or retire back. Being English, our troop had no such thought as retiring so we did our best and cleared the Germans opposite, leaving behind a good many dead. Fighting hard having had no food made us feel weak and running short of men made us feel worse. As our men got knocked out, we had about 1 man to 10 Germans. The fighting went on and the greater part of our men were either killed or wounded and some of those left went mad…. We were not sorry to retire when night came.63

One anonymous soldier also described feelings of fear after his initial trial by fire at Mons.

I never thought that such a hell of fire could be, as that which we went through at that place, the spitting of rifles on both sides, the guns and the bursting of shells was horrible, hundreds were bursting near us and the men and horses were getting blown to pieces, we were expecting to go to Glory every second.64

Lieutenant T. S. Wollocombe also deliberated on war after his initial trial by fire at Mons.

I can remember having a good pull at my water bottle after this message had gone off. It was about the first time in the day that my thoughts had been off the day’s work, and I remember how the sun was shining and how hot I was and I even had time to think that a battle was a wonderfully exciting thing when it is in progress.65

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63 Spencer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. The reader may notice the expression “Being English” present in the account. He goes back and forth with the terms “English” and “British” in his account.

64 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

65 Wollocombe, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32.
Ignorance was bliss, perhaps, for Lt. G. A. Loyd. He noted how he missed the early fighting at Mons, and he expressed his feelings on the matter when he wrote, “I had an almost irresistible desire to go out and join in.”

B. C. Myatt, of the 109th Battery, Royal Field Artillery, 23rd Brigade, 3rd Division, saw his first action later than Mons. On 13 September, he recorded in his diary what he perceived:

The guns and rifles were cracking in the distance. Well I felt rather frightened at first but got used to it when we started to march along the road up to join our Batteries and it was just getting dusk and thousands of guns and shells bursting in the air and houses and villages all alight. So you can guess what a sight it was... It was pretty but a fair hell on earth, in fact it looked as if we were entering hell – proper “Dantes Inferno”...

In some cases, men had their breaking point. Lt.-Col. Wollocombe described one such instance during the retreat from Mons.

Our mess was blown practically down.... Thorp rushed out of the house – no hit but off his head, and I believe got hold of a horse from somewhere and rode off towards the firing line. Nobody saw him again for about a week, when he rejoined – to go sick in the next action, suffering from mental shock and fits.

Fear continued during the retreat. C. S. A. Avis noted this during an alarm of an attack.

“There was confusion and sharp rifle fire which was quickly controlled. It proved to be false, nerves!” While retreating, Captain L. A. Kenny heard a story about the effects of fear involving a commanding officer, writing

67 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
68 Ibid.
69 Wollocombe, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 44.
70 C. S. A. Avis, 84/58/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.
…a Commander of one of our ammunition columns, who was very hard pressed by German cavalry, had lost his nerve, became very pannicky, and started throwing his equipment away to lighten his vehicles, which, by mistake, included the Cash in steel boxes belonging to the Divisional Paymaster General. He was later Court Martialled and cashiered but, joined the French Foreign Legion, was promoted sergeant for bravery and was later, after the war, reinstated to his rank in the British Army. 71

Fear and the strain of war sometimes took its toll to the point that soldiers would consciously make decisions to aid them in escape. Thoughts of such actions slowly crept into the minds of some of the soldiers, as cyclist T. H. Cubbon recorded in his journal at the time, stating, “The men wishing they were wounded to get taken away from here. Roll on.” 72 Soon afterwards, as Cubbon witnessed on 18 September, it was not just thoughts of receiving a wound: a comrade shot himself in the foot because he “was fed up.” 73 Going insane was a way to deal with the situation: “During the night a man near me quite suddenly started squealing like a pig, and then jumped out of the trench, ran straight down the hill towards the town, and shot himself through the foot. He was brought in by some artillery-men.” 74 This continued into October, when Cubbon again reported that the frustration of the war was taking its toll: “This position beginning to make every one feel fed up. Have been here since 14 Sept. 20 days and there seems to be no change in position. Have already had men shooting themselves….” 75

Confusion also caused fear. F. M. Packham recalled how he felt that first day (23 August) at the Battle of Mons when he wrote, “This day the 23rd of August 1914 was one of

73 Ibid., 39.
74 Denore, 4.
75 Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 52.
confusion, frustration, and disappointment. We marched from one place to another. We could hear Artillery and Rifle fire in all directions, but no sign of the enemy.”  

While approaching Mons, John F. Lucy also recalled some confusion due to the lack of knowledge he and his comrades had.

We became tired and bored, and fed-up because we did not know where we were going. Keeping the soldier in ignorance of what he has to do is very bad and demoralizing. I am sure we would all have been content and cheerful had we been given some inkling of what was happening.

The fog of war existed. Little knowledge of the surrounding events took its toll. During the Battle of the Aisne, Lt.-Col. Kempthorne reiterated this point, stating how the ignorance of the enemy’s location was quite “unnerving.”  

Soldiers often fought in this “fog of war.” Lt. Rowland H. Owen demonstrated this point in a letter to family and friends on 10 November, writing, “M [mother] & F [father] seemed to know more than I did of whatever I had even done myself! I was quite mystified by references in their letters to our show: “Those two great battles…”  

His letter continued:

One goes thro’ a fortnight of alternately sitting down under (s)hellfire & hobbling away, without necessarily seeing a single enemy, & then one’s parents write & say “it was glorious”! & refer to all sorts of names of battles. No part whatever of one’s conception of fighting gained during peace training has been realized; an encounter with some infantry would be a real treat, whenever an encounter is necessary.

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76 Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.

77 Lucy, 86.

78 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.


80 Ibid., 53-4.
Lt. Owen continued further, writing, “I am daily awaiting the news that the defeat of a certain German army is assured & that the war will then end. However the news takes the Hell of a time to come.”81 Tragically, he never received the news. He was killed in action on Hill 60 on 18 April 1915.82

This ignorance of the situation caused soldiers to react in a jittery fashion, as Major C. L. Brereton, on 2 September, noted during a pitch dark march, writing, “…we had a most creepy march along a twisty hilly road. Gunners occasionally let off a rifle, and we all expected to be attacked every moment.”83 Fortunately, no attack occurred that night. Having the jitters was not uncommon. J. McLlwain, shortly after the Battle of the Aisne, felt a “…habit of uncontrolled yelling I soon found to be infectious at times of stress and alarm. It was bad for discipline and I succeeded in resisting it.”84 Unfortunately, not all resisted the habit like McLlwain.85 Fear did not necessarily disappear as the war dragged. B. C. Myatt noted this on 20 October during the Battle of Ypres, writing, “I tell you this is a hard life and very tiring and nerve-racking.”86 One day after a shelling during the Battle of Ypres, Major B. T. St. John recalled what he noticed.

I put out two listening patrols calling for volunteers [sic] for this work which in those days was somewhat of a novelty in soldiering. I could not get a single man to volunteer so ordered a man from each platoon to report to me at once and these I handed over in pairs to two N.C.O.’s and drove them out over the parapet. They went in fear and trembling although in reality they were just as safe there as they would have been outside

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81 Ibid., 54.
82 Ibid.
83 Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 12.
85 Ibid.
86 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
the parados over which men went backwards and forwards without any hesitation whatever.

I always had trouble with the listening patrols. The men were all undoubtedly jumpy and hated the job and were always continually coming in to report imaginary advances by the Germans. I gave orders that they were not to come in until they actually saw men advancing but they imagined then that they saw them and I had to go out and show them that it was only their imagination. The only use I had from them was on the first night when they reported that digging was going on about 200 yards to our front.  

T. H. Cubbon also recorded the fear he witnessed at Ypres:

Every body in a panic, running away leaving rifles equipment and everything. 15th Hussars charged those who broke thro and drove them back. We have no reinforcements. The Connaught R. Special Reserves are here but will not help. They are being put in trenches with another Line behind them to fire on them if they attempt to come out.

Fear continued among the men, and the commanding officers had to step in to regroup them. During the Battle of Ypres, Major B. T. St. John ordered his men to follow a certain path to reach a rendezvous point, but he showed up and they weren’t there. So, he “…went again and found them all lying flat in the turnip field lower down, having taken cover there when the shots began to come over. I kicked them out of it and on to the road where I formed them up and told them what I thought of them….” Other commanding officers were not as brave as Major St. John, as J. McIlwain provided a story of one “Sergeant R.” “Sergeant R.” was known for

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88 Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 74.


90 Ibid.

jeering his men on to battle, but was one day found hiding behind the trenches in a house.”

Lieutenant G. A. Loyd also described a fearful situation.

Gen. Landon commanding the 3rd Brigade described his withdrawal from before Langemarck last night when he was relieved by the French Infantry. All day his brigade was subjected to the most terrific artillery bombardment experienced in the war. Comparatively the casualties were small, but the men were hammered and dazed and blinded by the explosions until they knew not where they were or what they were doing. For a long time it was impossible to get the French up to the trenches, and our telephone lines were severed so that communication had to be maintained by orderlies. Noise, concussion, smoke, splinters, earth, thundering explosives everywhere. The cannonading on the Aisne was described as slight compared to the terrific bombardment yesterday, when Officers, men who had grown callous and had been at Mons and had sat on the banks of the Aisne for a month, would ride in to Headquarters with messages, and were so shaken and dazed that, brave men as they were, they had to lie on the ground and rest before they could collect themselves sufficiently to communicate their reports.

Still, the professional British soldier often acclimated to his environment, as A. Reeve noted on 28 September during the Battle of the Aisne.

While we were sitting round our table at dinner time, the shells were bursting round the house; and although it might seem like brag, still I record the fact that we were all laughing and joking as if nothing were happening. All the afternoon “Whistling Charlie” was busy with his “coalboxes”. By way of explanation this is what we have nicknamed the enemy’s big guns and his little lumps of metal he chuck at us. He managed to clear the troops out of a neighbouring village but otherwise did no harm.”

B. C. Myatt also adjusted to the war, noting this on 21 September: “The first shell that came over made me dive a bit but it fell to our left. After that I hardly took much notice of this.”

Besides fear, the British professional soldier experienced suffered through other hardships during the initial months of the war, though several of these “hardships” had little to

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92 Ibid. After serving time for this, “Sergeant R.” eventually redeems himself and wins the D. C. M. in the Mesopotamian theater.


94 A. Reeve, 90/21/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 8.

95 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
do with the actual fighting. Even though life hung in the balance, life continued. While preparing for the march toward the Belgian frontier, a matter of attire brought controversy. F. M. Packham remembered the event that occurred on 13 August.

During our stay in Camp, some trouble occurred between some of our Regiment and some local Frenchmen. The men were having a drink in one of the Local Estamets, when one of the Frenchmen wanted to know why we had the Roussillon Plume in our capbadge, and one of our men had taken it from the French at the Battle of Quebec on the Plains of Abraham. This did not please the Frenchmen, and after an argument it nearly turned into a riot.\[^{96}\]

The commanding officer advised his men that it would be better to say the French gave it to Royal Sussex in recognition of the regiment’s bravery at the Battle of Quebec.\[^{97}\]

Despite retreating from Mons, Lt.-Col T.S. Wollocombe concerned himself with other matters.

We had a very good dinner cooked for us, but mine was rather spoilt owing to a little misfortune. It was a sort of “hot-pot”, and the first mouthful I had was a very hot potato which stuck to the roof of my mouth and burnt all the skin off it. I was sore for many days and seemed to get worse instead of better as time went on, and I did not lose the annoyance of it for about a fortnight.\[^{98}\]

Being able to correspond with family and friends back home was another issue that drew the soldier’s attention. A. Reeve noted the new army policy on 17 August when he wrote, “Not allowed to write letters containing any information regarding arrival or probable destination.”\[^{99}\]

The issue over correspondence continued on 26 September, along with an apparent campaign against tobacco, as A. Reeve noted. His commanding officer,

…cancelled the issue of some cigarettes that had been sent anonymously to the battery and worse still refused to censor any further letters home till further orders. This last

\[^{96}\] Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.

\[^{97}\] Ibid.


seems to have exasperated the men, as, when we were seated at our evening meal they all
marched in a body demanding to see the Colonel, the Capt. and the S.M. managed to
pacify the men with the promise of reprisals in the morning. The temper of the men is
very strong. 100

Though these issues appeared mundane and unimportant to the general observer, for the
soldiers, the issues were paramount. Fortunately for A. Reeve and his comrades, the issues saw
at least some resolution the following day, as A. Reeve noted how the C.O. issued cigarettes and
listened to grievances, which consisted mainly of “the delay in the franking and dispatch of
letters – over three weeks elapsing before letters are delivered and even then some go astray.” 101

Aside from dealing with fear as well as the other obstacles of war, punishment was
another item to cause concern. If a soldier disobeyed orders, consequences occurred. One night
during the march toward Mons, John Lucy recollected this.

So I mounted my first guard in France, and the duty opened my eyes to an entirely new
condition caused by the war. This was the dreaded Field Punishment Number One,
meted out to our troops. I had in my charge four soldiers who were being punished for
drunkenness, and one of them was an old war veteran and an ex-corporal. They were tied
up daily to either a tree or a wagon wheel in public for a fixed period, and they loathed it.
When loosed they were taken back to the guardroom and handcuffed.

Confinement of any kind is abhorred to an indescribable degree by Irishmen. No
words can describe the stigma of being tied in public to a tree or a wheel, and of being
handcuffed as well as being imprisoned. The punishment also included pack drill under
the provost sergeant. These men bore it with hard set faces which showed no more
emotion than the faces of the dead. We were all sorry for them, and the passing troops
averted their looks in shame and compassion when passing the bound prisoners. 102

A. Reeve, from the 4th Brigade, also recalled how the army command delivered its punishment
on 17 August during the advance to the Belgian frontier. “Two of my men got one day Field
Punishment B, which consists of being tied to gun wheel one hour in morning and one hour in

100 Ibid., 7.
101 Ibid., 8.
102 Lucy, 93.
afternoon.\footnote{Reeve, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.} Lucy demonstrated an act of compassion by taking his time to replace a punished soldiers’ handcuffs after a latrine visit. Unfortunately for Lucy, a ranking officer appeared at that moment, and Lucy received an earful of berating and harsh lecturing.\footnote{Lucy, 94.}

He told me contemptuously to go away. He was a rude, proud, and overbearing fellow, who should never have been in charge of troops, particularly Irish troops, whom, to say the simple truth, he knew little about, even though he was an Anglo-Irishman. His lack of good manners and his cruel stupidities made him highly unpopular, although he was a brave man, and later distinguished himself in the campaign.\footnote{Lucy, 94.}

A “Sergeant R.”, who left the trenches and his men to hide, was court-martialed, reduced in rank, and served two years in prison for his actions.\footnote{McLLwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 20-1.}

P. Botting, in his hand written journal, also discussed punishment. He noted several punishments dealt out to members of the 16\textsuperscript{th} Lancers: two men received forty-two days field imprisonment for drunkenness and one man received three months imprisonment for “ill treating” a horse.\footnote{Botting, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.} T. H. Cubbon also referred to soldiers receiving punishment for drunkenness and sleeping while on post.\footnote{Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 56. He does not, however, relay what those punishments were.}

Occasionally, however, soldiers were able to avoid punishment. J. McLlwain was one such lucky Tommie. He faced a court martial hearing for looting a French chateau, and he even

\footnote{Reeve, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.}
\footnote{Lucy, 94.}
\footnote{Lucy, 94.}
\footnote{McLLwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 20-1.}
\footnote{Botting, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.}
\footnote{Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 56. He does not, however, relay what those punishments were.}
admitted his guilt in writing. He did not, necessarily, admit his guilt at the hearing. That proved to be a good decision on his part.

Punishment came in different forms, but the worst type was reserved for crimes such as desertion and sleeping on guard. John F. Lucy recalled one such event while eating a meal after the Battle of the Aisne.

With food came news that rather shocked us: a deserter from an English regiment had been executed by a firing-squad that day. We were fed up about that, and would not look at it. An execution for cowardice or desertion hits us all too hard, and I doubt if it achieves the effect the authorities aim at. It disgusted the fighting troops, who perhaps are the most merciful of men.

Major B. T. St. John, writing about 1914 one year later, also described the consequences for letting down one’s comrades. On 17 October, at dawn, Major St. John,

… went round the posts again and found that at the most important one of all the men were all asleep instead of standing to arms as they should have been doing. The sentries and the N.C.O. I put back for court martial knowing of course that it meant certain death for them. It was the most disagreeable duty I had as yet performed.

For one 16th Lancer who fell asleep while on sentry duty, the death sentence was dealt.

Not only could violating one’s code of soldiery cause death, but mistakes also led to premature endings, as one Irish soldier on patrol found out when he returned to the wrong regiment at night. He received rifle-fire and died. Mistakes also caused harm to innocent


110 Ibid.

111 Lucy, 204.

112 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 14. Major St. John will be wounded later, never knowing for sure what happened to the accused.

113 Botting, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

114 Lucy, 225. For the record, the unfortunate Irishman was not Lucy.
bystanders, as Major C. L. Brereton noted on 2 September when he heard shots. However, “it turned out to be a Sentry in the Rifle Brigade, who, not receiving an answer to a challenge he made to an Officer, lost his nerve and fired.”¹¹⁵ The shooter missed the officer, but hit two men of 39th Battery, one of whom died later.¹¹⁶

In order to avoid punishment, the British soldiers’ required discipline. C. S. A. Avis, of the 1st Battalion, The Queen’s Regiment, Royal West Surrey, 3rd Brigade, 1st Division, recalled how important discipline was for the British.¹¹⁷ Before the fighting actually started, he noted how commanding officers read sections of the Army Act to the men.¹¹⁸ The sections dealt with looting and molesting women and “emphasized the punishments for such crimes.”¹¹⁹ Sometimes, because of the hardships of war, a lack of discipline occurred. Lt.-Col. Wollocombe noted of such an occurrence during the retreat from Mons.

We passed through several villages, where great hospitality was shown by the inhabitants as usual, and there was about one Company of another regiment attached to the Gordons in front of us, who abused this hospitality horribly. Our Colonel was very annoyed by their conduct, and went for the Major in command of them over it. It was very bad for our men behind, who were then, and had been all along, in perfect order in column of fours, to see these men all over the road like a flock of sheep.¹²⁰

¹¹⁵ Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 11.

¹¹⁶ Ibid.

¹¹⁷ Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 1.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 1.

During the course of war, the best levels of discipline still broke down, even for the British professional. Sir Cecil Lowther, while keeping a diary during the conflict, noted such lack of discipline involving rations:

No rations came, so we were ordered to eat the “iron” reserve ration. I fancy many of the men have already eaten theirs. This will be a lesson to be more provident. They are quite reckless about water too, drinking up their bottles at once, forgetting that any day may find them in action from sunrise to sunset with no chance of refilling.\textsuperscript{121}

Major St. John recalled events that transpired on 18 October while preparing for the Battle of Ypres. He ordered his company and another to dig a trench, and he,

…gave the officer concerned careful instruction about the type of trench I wanted dug and their position…. When I got down to our lines I found that the other people had started to dig quite the wrong type of trench and one which was of no use against shell fire and which we had to fill in again so that some three precious hours had been wasted…. I got my own men to work as soon as I could but I could not induce some of them to put any go into their digging. I tried to impress upon them that their lives depended on their efforts but they did not believe me and only worked hard when I or one of my subordinates drove them. As we could not be driving everyone at once, it began to get light before I was satisfied with the work done. I took care to give the lazy ones their own bits of trench to live in and as dawn was breaking we all got under cover and stood to arms.\textsuperscript{122}

The consequences for lack of discipline reared its ugly head the following day, as Major St. John wrote,

No sooner had daylight fairly broken than we realised that we were fairly in for it, shells came all round us, over us and before us. We all lay very low but the poor devils who had not dug deep when they had their chance had a bad time of it. One complete section of trench was wiped out and every man in it killed while a good many were wounded.\textsuperscript{123}

The good news was experience served as a great teacher, for the next night, Major St. John recalled how, “…we lay there and at night I had no difficulty in inducing the men to work hard at

\textsuperscript{121} Lowther, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 31-2.

\textsuperscript{122} St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 20-1.

\textsuperscript{123} Ibid., 21.
improving our position so far as was possible with the tools we had at our disposal.”¹²⁴ Learning from experience aided discipline. Major St. John continued his education, writing, “I would not allow them to fire their rifles aimlessly as many men did and I found that by not doing so we were not fired at in return, a fact of which I made use of on succeeding [sic] nights to improve our trenches.”¹²⁵

Still, it was war, and not all soldiers, even professional ones, were created equal. Discipline was not perfect, even for the British. J. McIlwain noted how, “there was no doubt the French and our people were making an unfair use of the protection of the red cross.”¹²⁶

For escape or to break the monotony of war, the British soldier described random ideas and musings. During the march to the Belgian frontier to possibly meet his maker, A. Reeve took the time to write down, on 18 August, that he, in fact, did not like frog legs.¹²⁷ Lieutenant G. A. Loyd and some of his comrades (including a fellow named Straker), however, did like duck, and hunting duck. Sometimes, they would “ask” the Germans to help with their hunting, even if it was during war.

The Germans at times aid us in our ventures. Straker was able to gain an excellent day’s sport with their assistance. While talking to Lee Warner, in charge of a section of Field guns behind Presles, he mentioned that he intended shooting duck during the afternoon and regretted that the majority of them were in the fields and not on the swampy ground in his vicinity. Lee Warner thought that the fields were marked by German guns and made a brilliant suggestion that perhaps if he thoroughly tickled up the guns they might be sufficient sportsmen to reply. At 3 o’clock the plan was carried out with complete

¹²⁴ Ibid., 22.
¹²⁵ Ibid., 33.
¹²⁶ McIlwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 41.
success, the Germans plastering the field with shrapnel, driving the ducks beautifully over Straker on the swamps. The result was a good dinner.128

Since the duck hunt was such a success, the quest continued.

Lee Warner dropped in for a cup of tea. Inspired by the success of the duck shooting adventure, one officer obtained the connivance of this enterprising gunner to gain his ends in another way. Not exactly relishing the news that Nugent intended visiting him and his posts during the afternoon which otherwise would be devoted to the wild duck, Lee Warner was persuaded to ginger up the German Artillery again, who in turn gallantly stood to their guns and replied by plastering black Marias along the only road by which the visiting officer was likely to come. In instructing young officers great stress is laid upon the co-operation of all arms in the field!129

Duck was not the only flying item that caught Lieutenant Loyd’s eye during the fight.

While visiting my posts after dark I noticed in the sky, Delaval’s Comet, the finest that I have ever seen. It was of immense size and easily visible to the naked eye. With the aid of a pair of field-glasses, it was magnificent. South West of the Great Bear and just South of the last star in its tail.130

Unfortunately for the Germans, the British did not cooperate as well, as Major J. L. Mowbray recorded:

Siege brigade headquarters had telephone message last night from Irish guards that enemy had band playing and concert in progress close in front of them. Without leaving table he telephones to battery who fired three rounds from guards directions. Message then received “Band stopped. Concert ended. Assembly dispersed. Good night.”131

Other humorous events occurred, though some did not find the humor. Lieutenant G. A. Loyd wrote of a mishap during the initial fighting at Ypres

During the night several of my men and several Hussars fell through the floor of their loft on to the horses below who objected to the intrusion upon their night’s rest, one of my men nearly died during the night and went to hospital with a fractured skull. A beam

128 Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 44.
129 Ibid., 45.
130 Ibid.
131 Mowbray, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32.
supporting the floor gave way and the floor divided, one half pinning two horses to the ground, the other half collapsing at an angle, so that men and sacks of beans tobogganed down on to the horses below. One man, left sitting up above on the slope, burst into howls of mirth at the sight and received a severe blow on the jaw by a friend who had not been so fortunate.\textsuperscript{132}

It was tricky for one British Tommie to distinguish blood, as J. W. Palmer demonstrated one day on 19 September when he thought he received a shell in his flesh, writing “…[I] suddenly became aware of that wet sticky feeling on my face and neck which denotes blood.”\textsuperscript{133} After he made it to HQ, soldiers laughed at him and asked “when I was going to learn the difference between jam and blood?”\textsuperscript{134}

J. McLlwain related a story involving a tea chest. His company was the last to draw rations one day, and he received orders to take the chest, which still had tea inside.\textsuperscript{135} He fixed the chest up to give him some cover, but shelling occurred, causing he and his company to retreat from the chest.\textsuperscript{136} He continued with the story, stating,

…there came a little fellow of my company who dived into the trench in front of me. Half blind and bothered he said, “Holy Jasus! What an escape! I was blew out of it, head over heels with one of them coal boxes. And the quarter-master-sergeant, ME.-what-de-ye-call-him, that gave us the tay, and us after coddin’ him about the big chestful he had all to his own cheek; sure he’s frittered to bits by now, for as I kem hell-for-leather down the hill, a great coal box blew into his trench, and there was his tay-chest sky rockettin’ twenty feet in the air. Sure he’s drunk his last drop o-tay in this world.” I had the pleasure of leaning forward and murmuring in his ear, “Liar”, and seeing the astonished look in his face.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{132} Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 50.

\textsuperscript{133} Palmer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 11-2.

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{135} McLlwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 21.

\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{137} Ibid.
Humor provided an escape from the war and soldiery. Two men trying to deal with the stress of hunger, escaped by using comedy. Platoon Sergeant J. McLlwain with the 2/Connaught Rangers Battalion wrote about two of his more comical friends during a long march:

“When’s breakfast time, Jack,” Marks would say with affected casualness.
“Well, I’ll couldn’t rightly say, Mark,” Jack would say in the same manner….  

The comedy routine continued:

“Well, I’ll tell you what I’d like, Jack,” Marks would say, “What would you say to a pair of kippers?”
Jack: “With a couple of nice thick slices of warm toast and butter, Marks?”
Marks: “And a big mug of hot tay, Jack.”
Jack: “Have mercy, Marks, don’t tempt me.”

That was not the only humor the regulars experienced, as Major St. John noted:

I found out that the Colonel’s horse whilst grazing by the roadside had shoved its nose or foot onto a nest of hornets and the Colonel was afraid that the brutes would attack the men who were rather close to them. We saw a lot of those hornets but I did not hear of any casualties resulting from them.

Humor provided an escape from war. It provided an escape from the reality of battle.

**Death and Courage**

The reality of war consisted of killing, to take another person’s life. The idea of killing another individual often entered the mind of the soldier. An anonymous regular who fought at Mons described the event as well as his emotion about it.

The Germans came out of their trenches in mobs because their game was to rush up by their numbers, but we just took steady aim and moved the down, but as soon as one line we down on came another like bees, our Gunners called them food for the guns, because

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138 Ibid., 9.
139 Ibid.
they came on in bundles and melt away and get blown up as soon as our shrapnel went into them.

Line after line kept coming on and taking cover behind their dead, but the nearest they got to our trenches was about 200 yards, yet that was near enough, seeing that we were in a rather awkward position, some of the Uhlans got very close to us but when our Maxims got going they soon made short work of them.

Our offices told us to keep up a rapid fire and we did, it was poured into them. What I was feeling like during all this I don’t know. I admit I was a bit funky and it was not a very nice feeling, but it soon goes after you have seen a few dead and dying lying about.\footnote{Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.}

John F. Lucy also pondered killing when reinforcements questioned he and his men about their experience during the retreat from Mons shortly after its completion. “All the same, our explanations were restrained, for we realized that the killing of men cannot be loosely talked about. Too grim anyway, and you never knew when you would get your own bullet.”\footnote{Lucy, 155-6.} What made it worse for many soldiers was when the enemy had no fighting chance. John F. Lucy recorded one such event when his men caught some German soldiers by surprise on Lucy’s own flank during the Battle of Neuve Chappelle. “I felt disgusted. We had slaughtered too many already. I was miserable until the German line was still and I prayed for them as I killed them.”\footnote{Ibid., 233.}

W. Clarke, of the Queen’s Bays, brought up the central point to the killing issue:

Everything seemed to happen so quickly, events were out of our control. I know that I felt frightened and excited at the same time. We were a very highly-trained and efficient Regiment and we did as we were trained to do, responding quickly to a situation without question. And if you wanted to live you had to kill.\footnote{Clarke, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.}
Some men, dealing with the anguish of battle, found themselves unable to fire. John F. Lucy noted one of his own men unable to pull the trigger.

“‘Why the hell don’t you fire?’ and the man began to laugh. I did not know him well. He had arrived with the first reinforcement only about ten days before. He laughed and laughed and dug his face back in the grass. It was no grim joke, as I then suspected. The man was hysterical with fear. I did not know hysteria, and could not understand him.\textsuperscript{145}

T. H. Cubbon, in his diary, never mentioned his involvement in shooting nor did he ever mention himself being involved in any action or engaging the enemy.\textsuperscript{146} Was this because he was a cyclist? This was not to say he avoided shooting, but the lack of discussion on firing was interesting. Others soldiers also noticed the somewhat ineffectiveness of their fire. Lieutenant Rowland H. Owen was one such soldier, as he noted in a October letter, writing, “…our shooting was v. bad and only about 20 of us cd. See anything.”\textsuperscript{147} Still, men demonstrated no hesitation on firing. A. Reeve, in fact, argued he hesitated the least when he experienced his trial by fire at Mons on 23 August, claiming “my gun firing the first shot at 5 p.m.”\textsuperscript{148}

Soldiers stared death in the face, and sometimes the soldier blinked first. Sir Cecil Lowther, while describing a near death experience, heard a,

…5.9 H.E. shell came just right for us. It struck a little tree about 12 foot up its trunk and exploded. I felt something hit me on the left breast and on right instep, no pain and did not think I was wounded. I looked up and heard Corpl. Jack saying his leg was broken, and the lad lying next to me looked pitifully round and I saw he was practically disemboweled by the base of the shell. Then I opened my shirt, found a fair hole about 4

\textsuperscript{145} Lucy, 181.

\textsuperscript{146} Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{147} Owen, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 37. He records that the poor shooting occurred around 26 September, during the Battle of the Aisne.

\textsuperscript{148} Reeve, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 1. Whether or not he shot with the intention of hitting the enemy can still be debated. Still, the fact that he recorded this suggests that he had no problem firing.
inches above the left nipple, and a lot of blood flowing, foot only bruised, but very painful, and end of left spur shot away. The bullet, or shell-fragment, had gone through my medal-ribbons. Did not feel sick and was not spitting blood, so concluded it was not serious, but as well to clear out.....

Major B. T. St. John provided great insight when he reflected on his imminent death when he was wounded while inspecting some woods.

I had not gone very far, however, when I became the centre of attraction of a hot fire which must I think have come from a machine gun. I started to run to the wood at once and the ground all round me was spattered up like the surface of a puddle in a rainstorm. I got another 30 or 40 yards when I felt as if I had suddenly hit my right arm against a hard obstacle in the dark. It was a very hard and very sharp blow and left a numb sort of tingling sensation in my arm quite different from the stinging of the blows of one or two pebbles which had been knocked into my legs by the shots on the ground which had hurt me quite as much. I still ran on but the wood looked a long way off and the shock of the wound had scared me a bit and I felt rather dizzy and out of breath (I was running with a coat and all my equipment on me) so I decided I would do a die and selecting as comfortable a place as I could I wheeled round the most approved Caton Woodville fashion and fell on my face. This had the desired effect for a minute or two and the firing stopped. I gave them time to turn their attention elsewhere and then proceeded to get myself more comfortable with a view to examining the damage to my arm and of tying it up.

I must have wriggled too much, however, for again a hot fire was opened on me. I lay for a few seconds wondering where it would get me, the bullets splashing mud all round me.

Suddenly I felt as if someone had gently drawn something rather hot along my shoulder and round my throat. This could not have been the bullet as it appeared to me to take quite an appreciable time to get from my left shoulder to the right side of my throat. I think it must have been the blood flowing. Certainly as soon as it reached my throat I began to cough blood through my mouth and nose and felt as if I were choking and everything looked a sort of blue colour. I thought I was done for and wondered how my family would take the news and whether I would know how they took it. I felt aggrieved and angry at the thought of leaving this jolly old world for to me it had always been a jolly place and it seemed hard lines having to leave without seeing Roger and Madge again. However, I prayed to God to hurry the matter up as I was getting very uncomfortable.

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149 Lowther, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 36. He did go to the hospital and received treatment.

150 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 44-6. Fortunately, he did not die, thus providing this account.
How long all this took I don’t know but one moment I thought I was gone and the next as it seemed to me I felt as if I was away up in the high Alps somewhere breathing breath after breath of invigorating air. This must have been caused by the cessation of the bleeding which enabled me to breathe not only through the nose and mouth but also through both the wounds in my neck.

I lay there for I suppose about 5 hours. It was very cold and the ground was wet and I remember having fits of shivering either from cold or funk or both. I could not see what was going on in the way of fighting but once they searched the field I was in with shrapnel. It was a narrow sort of field bounded on one side by the wood and on the other by the road and the width of the curtain presumably fired by 4 guns seemed to my eyes to cover the field most effectually. I watched two salvoes burst in front of me and then thought I would surely get my quietus but the 3rd effort went over me and all was well once again.151

As war continued, an acclimation to killing and death occurred. One anonymous Tommie described such an idea when he wrote about the fighting at Cambrai shortly after Mons.

“The last I remember of the place is, that several men were killed near me – but by that time, killing had become a matter of course.”152 H. M. Dillon wrote how he and his comrades had little difficulty in shooting to kill when he noted how he and his men dropped six Germans during an attack with no casualties of their own.153

At the Battle of Ypres, killing was easy, according to J. W. Palmer. When describing a German attack on 31 October, Palmer noted,

There was no need to aim as we could not possibly miss, it was only a question of reloading quickly enough. The terrific rifle fire did not have the desired effect as the Germans still came on, nearer and nearer, just a slight slowing up as they stepped over the bodies of their own dead and wounded. It seemed that nothing short of a miracle could possibly save us. It was a ghastly and sickening sight to see the slaughter, but it was their lives or ours.154

151 Ibid., 44-6.

152 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.


Palmer continued, discussing the events at the battle. The Germans still managed to advance, and,

…did not stop at the trenches either, and we guessed that our period of life or freedom was just about up. Hastily dropping our phones in the half-way trench and kicking some dirt over them, we ran hell for leather to where we knew our reserve trenches to be. How we escaped bullets from friend and enemy I do not know. We then made our way to the White House on the cross roads where several of our officers and a number of staff officers were. We were in the act of requesting instructions when a Black Jack made a direct hit on the house. A number were killed and wounded, both my chum and myself were knocked silly but I managed to drag him out. He was not wounded but talked a bit daft and said his head felt as though it was splitting. My head seemed ready to burst too. However we soon recovered and made our way to the batteries. If we thought we were going to have a rest we certainly made a mistake. The batteries were short-handed having lost so many men and were madly firing over open sights at a range of 500 yards. What a target. A target one might dream of but never see. The range kept dropping as the enemy got nearer and nearer. Eventually the shells appeared to burst as they left the muzzle of the guns. Fuse O. This was never used at target practice. Our only difficulty lay in the fact that we could not get the ammunition (from the wagons about 100 yards away) up quickly enough to feed the guns. Many of the Queen’s Regiment lay in the shallow trenches around our guns but nothing on earth would make them help us. Some of them did eventually after one had been shot by one of our officers. Poor devils, they were just about all in. They had been in action for days and could just stand no more. I do not think they cared if they lived or died, we had seen what they went through up the trenches. [They were tricked by Germans pretending to surrender.] It was just hell and impossible for any human being to stand for long. The open ground in front of us presented a shambles. As fast as we mowed him down so others came on. The heaps of dead and wounded seemed to increase every minute. They must be very brave unless they are being forced on by the weight of numbers in the rear.155

Palmer described the following disarray as the German masses continued to advance.

It appeared that the whole of the British were retreating in disorder and all madly trying to get away from that inferno of shot and shell. It was evident that unless someone took a hand at organizing the retirement, none of us would get far. Riderless horses, wounded men looking a horrible sight, overturned guns and wagons, all tended to make us realise that we were being licked. It was not a nice felling either. Nobody seemed to know where we were going or what we were doing. Get away from that hell was the first thought of us all.156

155 Ibid., 18. Author’s words in brackets.

156 Ibid.
Major Brereton discussed his constant involvement in skirmishes, and he discovered why—his commanding officer. On 8 September, Major Brereton wrote, “…apparently all these rear-guard and advance-guard jobs had been eagerly volunteered for by my Major, whose thirst for blood appeared unsatiable. Personally I only wanted food and sleep.” Obviously, Brereton did not possess the same “blood-thirst” of his commanding officer. H. M. Dillon alluded to not having a “blood-thirst,” but that did not mean he avoided his duty. He described one fight during Ypres where he and his men led a counter-attack against the Germans, and,

… we soon came across them and had the finest fight that ever was fought. I make no pretence at liking the ordinary battle, and anybody who says they do is a liar; but this was quite different. We first came on some fifty of the grey swine, went straight in and annihilated them. We were very quickly into the next lot and in a few minutes we were shooting, bayoneting and annihilating everything that we came across. I got a sharp sting on my leg and shoved my hand there and found a bullet which I think I threw at a German and myself after it.

Though some soldiers possessed more of a “lust” for killing than others, death occurred. The British professional soldiers, trained as they were, demonstrated their capacity for killing. In a letter to his mother, one anonymous soldier described such effectiveness during the Battle of the Aisne, writing, “We dug ourselves in for about 3 weeks with the germans constantly trying to get through with sheer weight of their forces but our steady fire moved them down like blades of grass.”

157 Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.

158 Ibid.

159 Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 45. Dillon and his men did reclaim the trench.

Obviously, with killing came corpses. The soldier found it difficult at times to deal with the surrounding dead. H. M. Dillon wrote about the dead:

It was awful. Some big caves in the hill were filled with dead & wounded the Germans wounded were put in the farm house & this soon was set on fire & they were burnt cattle were also burnt in the out houses. The whole place was littered with corpses…. Hundreds of German dead & wounded lie in thick clusters within a few yards but we cannot come out to collect them. It pelted all day & the trenches got inches deep in mud but one could not move hand or foot for the shells…. The moans & screams of the wounded Germans are fearful & you can imagine the filth after all this rain with thousands of troops in a small space. I hope the day after tomorrow will see us out of it….  

J. McLlwain discovered such difficulty while clearing the dead, writing, “I drag a body by the leg and pull the leg off. I recorded that I was ‘sick with the sight and the scent of mangled human flesh….’ I got a bit sick as the hot sun raised the smells.” B. C. Myatt agreed regarding the odor, when he scribbled in his diary on 27 September during the Battle of the Aisne: “No advance as the stench from the German dead is getting unbearable and they won’t let our fellows bury them. They fire on them, so we have to let them lie there.” Two days later, Myatt remained on the topic:

Well I think hell was let loose last night. Pretty quit this morning after a night of hell. The German infantry advanced in mass to try and push our fellows back, but they completely failed and they left thousands of dead about and they also give our infantry a awful twisting. The ambulances are passing now taking hundreds of our poor fellows wounded, but there you are, its all in war.

As B. C. Myatt’s diary entry suggests, the British soldier grew accustomed to the environment. The professional soldier acclimated himself to his environment, and often avoided

163 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
164 Ibid.
the thought of death while on duty. J. McLlwain discussed this point when he visited a garden where he wrote,

The scent of a million decaying scattered petals in an untended garden, mingling in recent memory with the fumes of the incinerator should suggest to the philosophic mind notions of death, destruction and decay. But the soldier on active service unconsciously protects himself from such reflections.  

Yet, the mind wandered if not on duty, as J. McLlwain noted while rambling:

When walking alone I came one day upon a long shallow trench containing the bodies of thirty or forty dead Germans: all young men, students I guessed. The trench was littered with song books or volumes of poetry. The bodies were comparatively fresh. I remember no blood or sign of dismemberment; my main recollection is of wonder at the placid or smiling expressions on the dead boys’ faces. I remembered then mention having been made of singing in the German trenches at night, of witnesses saying how beautiful it sounded.

McLlwain reflected further while coming across a ruined pile with a child’s slipper on it, writing,

Over a period of two months I had seen men killed and badly wounded with little feeling of sorrow, so preoccupied was I with my own apprehensions of what would happen next. Wishing to be perfectly honest I must say I can recollect no emotion save fear, and sometimes in the excitement of action, as on the 14th. September, that reflex exaltation arising from the consciousness of having got past one’s fears. But this upsurge of feeling was surprisingly new and unexpected; a hysterical release of something suppressed. The little slipper was such as might be worn by my own boy who was twenty months old when I left home in August. I had thought every day of my wife and child but with little disturbance of feeling. I wept a long time solitarily before rejoining my comrades.

His brain kept going.

I have attended very little to that great mass of literature which subjects emotional experience to formal psychological rules. I care for such explorations very little, being content with the interest of the experiences themselves or their vicarious representation in fiction or on the stage. One might speculate at length upon how the soldier at war—or the civilian, in these advanced days when he is in the firing line—can suffer horrors and


\[166\] Ibid., 32.

\[167\] Ibid., 32-3.
keep sane; what protective armour of the feelings does he weave; like the spider, from within?\textsuperscript{168}

Death and life went hand in hand. Kill or be killed was the sentiment of a professional. Yet, there was more to war than that simple idea. To be a professional meant one was a good comrade, a person who would risk life and limb for a fellow soldier. This was the basis of heroism. Examples of heroism existed within the British army. The professionals felt a link with their mates. It was camaraderie. It was the belief in the war, the belief in the right of the nation.

During the retreat from Mons, an artillery battery demonstrated such heroism, causing its legend swept through the British Army. On 1 September, a German cavalry division harassed the British troops during their retreat. The 11th Hussars, 1st Cavalry Brigade along with ‘L’ Battery, 7th Brigade, received heavy fire from the German 4th Cavalry Division.\textsuperscript{169} The German’s twelve guns knocked out three guns of ‘L’ Battery very quickly, but three other guns kept shooting until silenced by the deaths of all of the crew. Only one gun continued, and it lasted another hour, leading a charmed existence. In the end, ‘L’ Battery ceased to exist as a unit, but it saved the 1st Cavalry Brigade and allowed the arrival of British reinforcements, who subsequently devastated the German 4th Cavalry Division.\textsuperscript{170} W. Clarke, serving in the 1st Cavalry Brigade, was one who recalled the stand of “L” battery; his troop of fifteen had only

\textsuperscript{168} Ibid., 33.

\textsuperscript{169} Ascoli, 133-5.

\textsuperscript{170} The remnants of the German 4th Cavalry Division, which lost two-thirds of its guns, were withdrawn from the front and placed in reserve.
three left who were not killed nor wounded.\textsuperscript{171} According to Clarke, the story of the famed ‘L’ Battery swept the entire British Expeditionary Force.\textsuperscript{172} Although professional soldiers, tears fell from their faces.

Another example of heroism involved an Irish soldier fighting during the retreat from Mons. Lt. Loyd shared the story of an Irish officer under heavy fire that demonstrated his bravery. Still on his horse, the officer, “Ordered his men to cease firing and stand up while he strongly reprimanded them for firing indiscriminately and told them to be steady, the whole while he and his men were under heavy rifle fire.”\textsuperscript{173}

Even the wounded demonstrated heroism. A GHQ man, H. Bellew, ran across a wounded man of the Suffolks Battalion who lost an arm, and Bellew noticed that the fellow was not depressed nor angry. In a calm tone, the wounded man simply asked, “got a bit of bread Mate?”\textsuperscript{174} Bellew continued remarking on the bravery of the unlucky: “Saw a lot more of our wounded brought in, with legs and arms off, laying on stretchers all covered. Just their faces showing, smoking a pipe as if nothing was the matter.”\textsuperscript{175}

The idea of being taken prisoner hardly appealed to the soldiers of the B.E.F.; however, there were those who found courage by doing so. Major Eben Stuart Bart Hamilton served as a

\footnotesize{
\textsuperscript{171} According to James E. Edmunds, History of the Great War: Military Operations France and Belgium, 1914. 1, Mons, the retreat to the Seine, the Marne and the Aisne, Aug—Oct. 1914, (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922), 1\textsuperscript{st} Cavalry Brigade suffered no more than 135 dead or wounded with 53 belonging to “L” Battery.

\textsuperscript{172} The “charmed” gun of the “L” battery now sits in the lobby of Woolwich Munitions Factory.

\textsuperscript{173} Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{174} Bellew, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{175} Ibid.
}
medical officer who stayed with a wounded soldier on the roadside despite the risk of being taken prisoner—which he was.\textsuperscript{176} He performed his duty to save the life of the wounded man. Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Butt received renewed courage when he was captured, and from an interesting source at that:

\begin{quote}
We were (2 of us) lying in a horse truck with open wounds and 6 inches of horse dung on the floor. At a halt opposite an outgoing troop train reserve troops crowded round the door to see the English Swine. A senior W. O. told me they would soon “shoot” our London and ordered me to show myself. Pointing to my leg I declined the invitation so they tried to drag me out—a queer feeling being all but lynched. I admit to being scared stiff and at every halt cowered down at the back of the truck. Then suddenly I had a vision of the Cross at the far end of the truck and a voice crystal clear said “What do you think your suffering is compared to that as the figure pointed to the crucifix.” From that moment fear went.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

After the war, the former prisoner visited the site of his vision. He saw “a wooden cross slightly leaning with the end of a shell case sticking out near the base—it had proved to be a dud.”\textsuperscript{178} He learned then what many British soldiers learned from World War I—“some say that there are no miracles.”\textsuperscript{179}

One German captain of the 11\textsuperscript{th} Hussars recalled a rare individual feat by a British soldier named Wilson:

\begin{quote}
The most conspicuous episode in this section of the fighting was a really great performance on the part of an Edinburgh man named Wilson, in the Highland Light Infantry. That battalion had just made a most successful and dramatic charge, led by Sir Archibald Gibson-Craig and Lieut. Powell (both killed), and had established itself in a forward position with its left on a small wood. From this wood a German machine-gun began playing on the ranks of the battalion with such disastrous accuracy that it soon became clear that either the machine gun must be silenced or the position evacuated. Pte.
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{176} E. S. B. Hamilton, 87/33/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{177} T. B. Butt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{178} Ibid. The “official casualty lists” reported him “missing believed killed.”

\textsuperscript{179} Ibid.
Wilson thought the former alternative preferable, and, getting a K.R.R. [King’s Royal Rifles] man to go with him, crept out towards the wood. The K.R.R. man was shot almost at once, but, quite undeterred, Wilson went on alone, killed the German officer and six men, and single-handedly captured the machine gun and two and a half cases of ammunition.\(^{180}\)

Heroism did not necessarily die as the war progressed. One anonymous soldier described such another situation involving the heroism of the British during the Battle of Ypres.

They tried to break through one day… it would be about the middle of Nov it was very cold and a blinding sleet blowing in our faces everybody was wet through we could see them getting ready as if to attack I made a pair of field glasses on them and the captain told us to be on the alert we sent reinforcements to the troops on our left who were being shelled with Johnson’s one of our officers took them but he came back wounded my captain brave old chap went out under heavy fire and brought a man in who was hit in three placed a few minutes later he took reinforcements out which never landed and he got three bullets in him and I could hear him shouting for more men whilst he was dying on the ground.\(^{181}\)

**Desire for Continuing War**

During the fight, soldiers tended to focus on the specific events when recording their thoughts; however, it was during those precious few breaks from action where they examined what had transpired in their life. There were the times that were very enlightening because the soldier had the time to reflect and formulate his ideas on the action to come or the action experienced.

In a letter dated 6 September, one day after the retreat from Mons finally ended, Lt. Rowland H. Owen, wrote about his conflict between home and duty during a breather.\(^{182}\) He scripted, “I am looking forward to coming home, and I don’t mind how soon it is; but I suppose


\(^{182}\) Owen, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 12.
it is one’s duty to remain out here to endeavour to smash up the German Empire.”\textsuperscript{183} After the Battle of the Aisne, B. C. Myatt reflected on the ability of the British Army: “I think they give the Germans a lesson that they won’t [sic] forget in an hurry. They are finding out that we are not such a contemptible little army as they thought we were, when they started.”\textsuperscript{184} Lt. Rowland later shared more feelings about the war, suggesting his distaste for it.

I have not met a single man (or horse) of the English, French or German armies who is not dying for the war to finish! John and the Kaiser alone want to keep on. I often feel that this war has done a lot towards the world’s peace. You see; if all goes well, we ought to win the victory which Swallows up all strife, like Waterloo; and that ought to keep peace for, say 50 years. By that time I think the really universal feeling against war will manage to make soldiers a thing of the past. Rather rough on John, but still. I don’t really see that this war can go on much longer. I always imagined that Germany had been informed by her internal ministers that she must not make war unless she could.

Guarantee to
1) finish in 6 weeks or
2) win such a decisive battle within that time as to let them do pretty well as they liked. Now, after about 8 weeks, things have gone against them, and our fleet is blockading them as tight as blazes; I don’t see that they can go on for long, especially if we bring off a great victory.

They can’t have any civilians at home at all – the place must be at a standstill; and there [sic] can’t be very much grub.\textsuperscript{185}

B. C. Myatt wrote in his journal shortly before the Battle of Ypres, stating,

War is a horrible thing. The pitiful sights of the dead I shall never forget. Faces all drawn up in agony and pain and scattered with shrapnel shells. The Gordons seemed to have lost a lot of men around here and the Northumberland fusiliers. The touching part of the scene was when they took the personal belongings out of the pockets of the dead to send home to their wives and parents, photos of their wives and children, it made me think of my loved one at home, and as we advance we never know when a great shell is going to lay dozens of us low. The Germans seem to have all the ranges around here.

\textsuperscript{183} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{184} Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
\textsuperscript{185} Owen, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 20.
The place is over-run with spies. The French would sell their own homes. I am thinking they give us away wherever we go.186

Myatt continued his thoughts a few days later, writing, “a terrible battle raging all last night, a fair hell. They are trying to break through at all costs. Thousand of Germans and our fellows killed. Its getting beyond human endurance, the battle raging all day long.”187 The fighting continued, and so did Myatt’s writing:

They are hurling masses of troops at us regardless of loss. They are trying to get to the coast, but we are stopping them at a great loss. We must soon get help. Further to our left, the Germans are trying to get into Ypres. Our troops are being hard pressed all along the line but we are holding them with a grim struggle. Its getting proper desperate something as got to go before long either them or us. We are fighting hard.188

Myatt went further, writing about the desperate situation and carnage of Ypres:

Well we got the attack and held them. My God if help does not soon arrive we will be overwhelmed by numbers. They are trying to get through to Calais and the coast. Up on our left the famous Russian Guards are forcing our troops hard. It’s hand to hand fighting, they are pushing us back slowly. If something does not soon happen, our troops will collapse from exhaustion. Constantly at it day and night and raining hard. It’s nothing but shoot shoot all the time. This is a murderous war and no mistake.189

Despite, the desperate tone, Myatt displayed a sense of pride in the British soldier: “We are fighting for our very lives and its only pluck that is holding out with us, we are done up.”190 That

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186 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. Notice that Myatt does not have much faith in the French population at this point.

187 Ibid.

188 Ibid.

189 Ibid.

190 Ibid.
did not, mean, however, he still liked war: “It was now snowing hard and sleet was falling and
the wind blew hell. I could have cried with pain of the cold. My God, this is a terrible life.”\textsuperscript{191}

Lieutenant G. A. Loyd reflected on the fighting before and at Ypres, writing, “I cannot
think of these days without believing that the fighting has been, and will be clearly proved to be
in the future, of a most dogged, and of a most desperate character, and that issues were at stake
which the simple soldier is unable to grasp.”\textsuperscript{192} He continued his reflection on the conflict at
Ypres:

In the midst of the long line of battle in the north, with death, wounds and distress in
every military incident in each day of suspense, it seems that the war is of interminable
length and that nothing is gained by each day of disastrous labour, in which our very
gallant fellows are pounded to death by colossal shells without the power, in most cases,
of replying with the rifle. Perhaps without even seeing the enemy opposed to them
simply sitting all the livelong day exposed to the expectation of a terrible and tearing
wound or, at the best, a quick and merciful death, all the while with the screeching
whistle of explosives in the air and the nerve shattering, thunderous and abrupt explosion
of columns of smoke and dirt in their midst, and then the casualty roll of names, gallant
and unselfish gentlemen, who have recognized for days that their turn had to come soon,
but who always went forward with fear in their hearts and a cheery smile on their lips,
leading their men with a sense of responsibility and for love of duty, the representatives
of a just and generous race, seldom speaking a word of hatred against the enemy, but
sympathetically feeling for those who had been brought involuntarily for the most part
into a conflict so immoral. They do not revile the foe, and the very fact that the enemy’s
infantry dare show themselves in open attack, causes them to pity the enemy the more
and the powers that caused it.\textsuperscript{193}

When it seemed that the British were able to fend the Germans off at Ypres, Lt. Loyd realized its
importance.

Gen. Sir J. French visited the various lines and sent round a congratulatory notice bidding
the troops under his command to hold on, as in a few hours or at least a few days the
enemy would be once again in retreat. Many units are in a very bad way and it is now

\textsuperscript{191} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{192} Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 56.

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 62.
only a very weak, a very sad, and a very gallant little Army that holds the line and before which the Germans are about to retire.

When the enemy failed to capture Ypres and shattered their strength on the 31st of October, the day was the great turning point in the campaign in France, and we felt it at the time, dazed as we were.\textsuperscript{194}

J. W. Palmer also reflected on the war up to Ypres, writing, “We now realise that war is not the light-hearted affair we had reckoned on.”\textsuperscript{195}

Meanwhile, other soldiers focused on comfort. Lt. Rowland H. Owen sought to make himself as comfortable as he could, considering the circumstances. He noted this in a 13 November letter, where he participated in the development of the trenches.

I scratched myself an awfully comfortable little dugout in that last position – for sitting – I made it conform exactly to the shape of my own bottom – I’m awfully sorry, that’s twice! – so that my - - itself and my knees and so on were all supported instead of all the burden being on my heels – the only drawback of being underground like that is that the effect of these crackers exploding right on top of you is exaggerated and makes you feel as tho’ someone had been trying to wring your neck – but then there is always the joy of discovering that nobody really has.\textsuperscript{196}

Major B. T. St. John also discussed the development of the trenches, comparing them with the trenches of 1915.

In those days the trench warfare then in vogue was a very different affair to the trench warfare of the present day (a year later). We had no reserves and only an apology of a support. There was one Battalion in each Division which was occasionally taken from the trenches and called a Divisional reserve while it was supposed to be taking a rest. The result of this was that we only had one line of trenches which were more or less hastily contrived affairs undrained and without dug outs. We tried to make dug-outs once but being unable to procure any material for supporting the roofs, they usually fell in the first time a shell bumped anywhere near them and buried the occupants. The habit was therefore discontinued by order of Divisional Headquarters.

\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 67.

\textsuperscript{195} Palmer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 20.

\textsuperscript{196} Owen, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 39.
Ones turn of duty in the trenches was therefore not a comfortable period though personally I preferred it to our periods of so called rest.\textsuperscript{197}

He continued his reflection on the initial trenches of 1914.

The trenches were still bad and moving along them was a difficult matter and occasionally necessitated treading on dead men, as to throw the body over the parados only drew fire. Thinking of this now and writing it down may appear to be merely bravado on my part but I mention it to show, what impressed me greatly at the time, how little one feared death in any form or thought of it when one was always face to face with it, and one knew that one was certain to get a bullet in course of time and that it might come along during the next few minutes.\textsuperscript{198}

With the beginnings of the trench came the change in not only the war, but also the outlook of the soldier. P. Botting consistently opened his journal entries with “still in the trenches….\textsuperscript{199}” J. McLlwain argued this point once the British advance began to stall. He felt this was,

\begin{quote}
… a new and particularly disagreeable phase following the freedom of movement which characterised the first three weeks. The period was rather terrifying, wearying, wearing; with moods of anger, funk, despondency and disgust; and, therefore, not favourable to consecutiveness in recording the eventful experiences that crowded the days. Events spreading over several days will best be dealt with in isolation.\textsuperscript{200}
\end{quote}

McIlwain also commented that the British did not dig-in like the other combatants: “There is little attempt at making really strong trenches. We are far behind the French and Germans at that business.”\textsuperscript{201} H. M. Dillon admitted that he disliked trench warfare, especially in reserve.\textsuperscript{202}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[197] St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 24-5.
\item[198] Ibid., 34.
\item[199] Botting, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
\item[201] Ibid.
\item[202] Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 47.
\end{footnotes}
After the Battle of Ypres, B. C. Myatt noted the difference between the previous fighting and trench warfare when he recorded in his diary on 27 November: “We have taken the sting out of the great German attack for the coast. They can see it’s a hopeless task. We have about wiped their famous Prussian Guards, but my God, we have lost some thousands of men around here. It’s getting more like a siege war.”

Lt. Owen went further than just the trenches, describing his feelings about the war while sitting in the dugout.

I am afraid it is getting rather disappointing reading now; in fact the war seems to be taking a monotonous turn, and still no rest for anybody – indefinitely which I don’t like a bit. Of course, tho’, I agree entirely about the bitter end, but I have a sort of secret longing that it won’t be my bitter end as well; as I am extraordinarily, quite wrongly I suppose, anxious to get home.

The British soldiers faced the obstacles that men in combat faced. They displayed a high degree of effective soldiery despite the odds being against them. Their training, development of camaraderie, and avoidance of fear helped them along the path. They acted in a way that exuded soldiery, as well as “Britishness.” For the British soldier, the war was about fighting the Germans and aided his fellow comrade. They were not there to conquer. The memoirs demonstrated this point.

“The days seem long, and the progress slow, but in years to come no doubt that which seems of fearful length now will be recorded as a record of speed and will stand forth as memorable for it’s celerity.” For Lieutenant G. A. Loyd, his prophesy was fulfilled. The year

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203 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
1914 suggested war of mobility and speed for historians. It was not necessarily the case for the soldier of the time.

For those unfortunate soldiers who did not survive the war, their memories lived on because of their belief in soldiery and nationalism. Lieutenant W. Edgington’s comrade and friend wrote a letter to Edgington’s mother describing her son’s death at Ypres in 1915. The author summed up the British soldier in 1914: “he died like the hero he was doing his duty till the last never thinking of himself but only of his men.”

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207 Ibid.
CHAPTER SEVEN
BRITISH CASES OF PROFESSIONALISM

The British professional soldiers persevered despite the odds being stacked against them in that fateful summer of 1914. The situation for the BEF was dire, but the British soldiers responded with professionalism. This professionalism reflected the culture of British nationalism. The ordeal of retreat brought fatigue and pending destruction to the army, but the British were resilient. They carried themselves with professionalism to the end, and demonstrated heroism that allowed its survival.

Professionalism was a central component to the British soldier. Even John F. Lucy recognized that soldiery, for the British regulars, was a profession: “We were now settling down to this business of soldiering, and had begun to view it in serious fashion.”¹ Ambitious individuals typically sought to elevate themselves in their work, and Lucy was no exception. “‘Promotion’, I said to him in the argot of the soldier, ‘is my mark.’”² As a profession, did it matter who was the enemy? H. Spencer thought it did. He recorded how on 5 August, “we heard the rumour was correct and we all felt glad we were going to fight the Germans.”³ John F. Lucy disagreed with Spencer, however, when he described the feelings of his own comrades. “Most of them, in the manner of the professional soldier were unconcerned as to who their allies

¹ Lucy, 62.

² Ibid. Lucy rose to sectional commander and full corporal at age twenty-one by 1914. He was in charge of eight men during the early months of World War I. His brother, Denis, was also a section commander.

³ Spencer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
would be, and as to the cause for which they would fight, which was just as well.\(^4\) Professional soldiers followed orders, and sought to prove their worth. John F. Lucy noted this attitude demonstrated by his mates, stating, “They were quite content to do as their officers told them, and were well pleased, as I have said, at the prospect of war. Already some of them were discussing the kind of medal they would get for fighting.”\(^5\)

Professionalism impressed other soldiers, such as John F. Lucy. He expressed this while witnessing a display by the Munster Fusiliers (an Irish battalion), stating, “…they showed the professional Irish soldier at his best in all the panoply of 1914.”\(^6\) As the British Expeditionary Force marched forward, they took pride in their composition, and its profession. Apparently, other peoples did not know how professional the British army really was. A French woman demonstrated this point when noting how young some of the British soldiers appeared. As John F. Lucy noted this encounter, stating,

“They were frankly amazed when they found we were not conscripts.
‘What? Volunteers?’
‘Yes, madame. There are no conscripts in the English Army.’
‘Truly?’
‘Yes, truly.’\(^7\)

The professionalism demonstrated itself to the French observers, as they offered wine to the British soldiers before battle. British officers informed their men to not take the gift. John F. Lucy noted this, stating, “We therefore declined the wine graciously but reluctantly, much to the

\(^4\) Lucy, 77.
\(^5\) Ibid., 78.
\(^6\) Ibid., 69.
\(^7\) Ibid., 89-90.
horror of some of the Frenchmen, who could not understand it.” H. M. Dillon also appreciated the professionalism of the British soldier. While writing about one fight during the Battle of Ypres, he discussed how the German,

… losses are enormous, and their men give me the impression that they try to get wounded or taken prisoner, the only means of getting away from the incessant nerve racket. Our men are fortunately a tougher more fighting lot, and in spite of the fearful casualties we have had, are always ready. In fact, with hardly an exception, they are splendid.9

Professionalism also involved experience. One anonymous soldier from the 9th Brigade (also known as the Iron Brigade) accounted for this point. Upon arriving at Mons on 22 August, he wrote,

It did not come strange to me to be in that part of the globe and away from home, as I have soldiered in several countries as Africa, Mauritius and India, of course most of us did not understand a word of French or Belgium but like all Tommies we soon made ourselves at home.10

The experience of war allowed the soldier to acclimate to his surroundings. B. C. Myatt alluded to this idea in his diary entry on 2 October, stating, “…a branch of a tree knocked my hat off and just about startled me, but after a few months of this you get a nerve of iron and you want it to.”11 Lieutenant G. A. Loyd alluded to this as well as to the musical capabilities of conflict on 7 October.

In great luxury we had brought out two drawing-room chairs into the sun on the S. side of our house, and sitting in a hollow formed by the hills on which our own guns were placed, the bang, smack, bang of our own and the smack, whistle, smack of German shrapnel bursts, the heavier, deeper boom of more distant guns, and the occasional pom,

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8 Ibid., 90.

9 Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 47.

10 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

11 Myatt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
pom, pom, of our pom-poms firing at aeroplanes, make a fine music, and each shot reverberated and crackling in tremendous echo along the Aisne valley made a magnificent song of war.12

For the anonymous soldier, experience aided the Tommie in adjusting to a different area.

Still, despite the fact that the British soldiers were regulars who volunteered rather than experiencing conscription, not all of the professionals who marched forth in 1914 possessed wartime experience. H. Spencer made this argument when he wrote in his journal on 18 August before the conflict began. “Our one wish was to get at the Germans. Little did we know what we were in for: not many of us knew what Active Service meant.”13

It was, however, the professional British soldier, despite experience, that decided not only the fate of the British army, but the French army as well. The soldiers, influenced by British nationalism, demonstrated their abilities in, of all things, a retreat. For the British, the Retreat from Mons passed into legend. Something in the British character had a penchant for hanging in there when things looked bleakest, and many of their most stirring stories stemmed from retreats: on Corunna in 1809, from Kabul in 1842, and to Dunkirk in 1940.14 The retreat from Mons was no exception. The personal accounts of the British soldiers related their experiences during the trying time of the Retreat from Mons. By marching in the face of great peril and by making a heroic stand, the British army helped save the day for the allies, as well as for Great Britain. The small, well-trained British Expeditionary Force accomplished a major feat against great odds.

12 Loyd, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 43.

13 Spencer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

The “contemptible little army” during this thirteen-day episode played a small but nonetheless vital part in preventing an early German victory.15

**The Retreat from Mons**

“Marching, marching, marching!” It was not exactly a walk in the park, but the old contemptibles treated it as such. That may be a bit of an overstatement; nevertheless, the British Expeditionary Force succeeded in carrying out one of the greatest retreats in military history. This allowed them to avoid certain destruction by the advancing German army. On average, the B.E.F. marched 250 miles in 13 days, keeping the German 1st Army from flanking them. They carried it out by marching, and marching, and marching. Many had no idea what happened elsewhere or why exactly they retreated, but they marched. There were accounts of a lack of ample food, but they marched. Most found the roads congested with poor, local refugees, but they marched, often dropping burdensome supplies. Some received “metal telegrams” (shells) from Germans, but they marched. Despite the sweltering heat of the French summer, they marched. Even though they suffered utter exhaustion and bloody feet, they marched. These “Old Contemptibles” enabled the Allies to continue the war, mainly because they succeeded in carrying out a successful retreat, one that only a hard-nosed, professional army had the ability to perform in the face of a disastrous setback.

The physiological factors played no small role in the soldiery of the men. Even before the fighting began, soldiers were already expressing fatigue in their accounts. On the march toward Mons, one anonymous soldier wrote how he was “dead tired” upon the arrival.16

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15 Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany described the British Expeditionary Force as “General French’s contemptible little army of mercenaries.” This became a nickname for the original B.E.F.
Retreating was not necessarily as demoralizing a factor for the professional soldier, though it was not an uplifting experience, either. For one anonymous soldier who received the orders to withdraw from Mons, “we were fairly worn out, but we were all in a good spirit and did not want to retire.”

The confusion of the withdrawal from Mons caused some issue. Many British regulars could only guess what was going on during the retreat. They faced a difficult march retreating from the invading Germans, and few regulars fully understood why. Captain Needham of the 1/Northhamptons Battalion wrote about this problem: “My sergeant asked me why we were still retreating. I said it was a ‘strategic retirement.’ He looked blank. I felt [like] a fool.” An NCO with the 3rd Cavalry Brigade reported a common chant the British used during the Mons retreat: “Do it; Yes. We’ll Do It; What is it.” Not only were the regulars left out of the proverbial loop, but the situation confused them as well. One lieutenant recalled, “We had no notion where we were going. We knew we were playing a big game and we knew what the rules were, but we did not know what the game was.”

This was an army that recently advanced from the coast through northern France across the Belgium border, but now they headed backwards: F. M. Packham with the 2/Royal Sussex Battalion wrote:

> The next morning we were up early, and as we marched along we were surprised at the number of times that we crossed the Belgian-French border. It was very confusing, and

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16 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

17 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

18 Ascoli, 132.

19 Botting, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

we appeared to be retiring, and as we had not been in any action, could not understand why.\textsuperscript{21}

Despite the confusion, they marched on.

For some, the retreat had a demoralizing effect. “March, march, march, all the blessed day. Halt! dismount-mount, and then dismount.”\textsuperscript{22} According to Major J. L. Mowbray, “There was general depression…” on 26 August, the first day of the retreat.\textsuperscript{23} These were the feelings and words of A. Reeve. The retreat was a trying event for the professionals of Britain. Reeve seemed displeased when he wrote this, and he had a horse. Most of the troops, being infantry, did not, and they had to rely on their shoes rather than horseshoes. During one halt at St. Quentin on 27-8 August, E. S. Butcher noted the appearance of the men:

At St. Quentin here all our troops are gathering, from the big retreat from Mons, it is a dreadful sight, wandering infy men trying to find their own units, + wounded men looking for ambulances, one man came up to us + asked us to take him off his horse, we did so + found he was shot in the arms + legs, he could sit on the horse alright, but could’nt move, so we packed him in a Field Amb!ce….\textsuperscript{24}

Not only was it demoralizing for some, it was also very hurried. As Brigadier-General H. C. Rees with the 2/Welsh Battalion said it best, “We ran one blinkin’ mile and ‘ave marched another thirty since.”\textsuperscript{25} What made matters worse was the B.E.F. was on the go since the August 9. Many in the army hardly anticipated the marathon marching that awaited them, as Knox Gore Saunders, serving in the 60\textsuperscript{th} Rifles, stated:

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 5.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Reeve, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 2.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Mowbray, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 8.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} E. S. Butcher, 97/4/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} H. C. Rees, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 12.
\end{itemize}
During the retirement the battalion marched over 200 miles southwards. This may not seem much but it must be remembered that many of our men were reservists not used to much walking. It was the long hours on the road which told. We always started before day-break and reached our destination after dark.\textsuperscript{26}

It was not only trying to the regular soldiers, both officers and enlisted men, but also to the artillery: “This march was very trying as the company were carrying 170 rounds of ball ammunition. We had not been able to hand in our extra 50 rounds owing to the boxes and carts having refilled.”\textsuperscript{27} “Everyman” at war dealt with the excruciating pain of the march; “it has been fearful work, 25 hours with hardly a stop once and it has been going on so far almost continuously for days.”\textsuperscript{28} “All the days marched morning noon and night” and “everybody limping” were the universal complaints heard from the “Old Contemptibles.” Staff officers possessed no exemption from the unprecedented rigors of the full-scale retreat: “I don’t know how often we moved house during the retreat, but we got pretty good at it, scarcely bothering to unpack wherever we stopped.”\textsuperscript{29} Although most of these soldiers were regulars, they had no desire to go through with another such retreat ever again: “We covered 62 miles in 48 hours and I never want to do the half of it again.”\textsuperscript{30} A few even began to lose heart over the situation, as Major B. T. St. John, serving in the 1/Northumberland Fusiliers Battalion, noted: “All along the road we saw signs of a hurried retreat. Overturned[ed] motor and other wagons and dead horses were strewn by the roadside while numbers of fed up and exhausted men sat looking

\textsuperscript{26} Saunders, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{27} P. Whitbread, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.

\textsuperscript{28} Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{29} Ascoli, 90.

\textsuperscript{30} St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 42.
disconsolate and cross on the bank.”31 Yet, for the most part, the “Old Contemptibles” moved on—marching, and with that, morale rose:

A glorious day. For the second day in succession the guns are almost silent, and very far away. Our retirement is slow today. With exception of the dead horses that mark the road there is no disorder, and the signs of distress that marked the retirement from before Mons are lacking.32

It was, however, not all marching. Since the enemy remained close on their heels and threatened their flanks, the British soldiers dug trenches whenever they stopped in case the “Uhlans” attacked.33 This became tedious due to their continual withdrawal.

We sited and marked out our trenches and by midnight had the company up and at work at the digging of them. The men were tired and it was a heartbreaking job to be constantly having to almost kick them to do work which was to protect them from Death.34

This became a constant theme, because the tired men needed protection from their foes in case an attack came.

We dug ourselves hasty entrenchments and lay in them for about an hour and then went back another mile and formed up with the rest of the Battalion in a stubble-field where we made ourselves some protection in case we were shelled and lay down for a 3 hour rest.35

How these men felt about the futility of their work, for every few hours they abandoned their artwork just to retire and create new ones. Then, not all the time were the men digging for themselves. After digging a trench, “Troop officer came along to inspect,” R. G. Garrod noted,

31 Ibid., 35-6.
33 British regulars used the term “Uhlans” quite often when referring to the German cavalry soldiers.
“and when he found we had made a nice hole, he got into it and ordered us forward two or three hundred yards as look outs.”36

The unexpected nature of the Mons Retreat forced British General Headquarters to improvise to keep the B.E.F. supplied. One innovation, developed by Major-General Sir William Robertson, essentially called for the dumping of supplies onto likely retreat route crossroads.37 Though wasteful, Robertson’s technique had a two-fold effect. It kept the soldiers fed, and it gave the Germans, upon seeing these apparently abandoned supply dumps, the impression that the British army was in full disarray. J. Andrew, serving in the 5th Cavalry Brigade, recalled one encounter with a supply dump on September 2: “After a short march we came across a big lot of rations and forage and a mail which had been left for some columns and as the Germans would eventually come across them we took what we wanted and burnt the rest….”38 Though there was plenty of food at these supply sites, it did not mean the soldiers utilized it all. With one survivor recalling: “Sides of beef, stacks of bacon and bully, jam, tea. But there wasn’t time to hang around cooking a four-course meal. I’d say our main diet during the retreat was German blood and French apples.”39 Time was of the essence, and there was little time for gourmet cooking. Even stockpiling these supplies became futile, as Brigadier-General Rees wrote:

Our rations were dumped for us along the road and every man took anything that struck his fancy. It was rather amusing to see what the men selected. One man near me had

37 Spears, Liason 1914, 217.
38 J. Andrew, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
39 Ascoli, 89.
seven tins of bully beef and not a single biscuit. He threw one tin away per mile on the average as he grew tired.\(^40\)

There were units, however, which had less fortune in the fact that they often missed these supply dumps during the retreat.

The government rations, Bully, tea, jam, biscuits, bacon, and cheese were perfectly splendid when we happened to get them. They were usually dumped in likely villages but we as a rule went by another road or passed them in the night. After a time, owing to want of sleep, one lost appetite.\(^41\)

Soldiers who missed the supply dumps frequently resorted to living off the land. R. G. Garrod, also in the 5\(^{th}\) Cavalry Brigade, and his fellow soldiers mistook crab apple trees for apple trees.\(^42\) They ate the crab apples, and “the way we all suffered afterwards can easily be imagined.” Thirst also became a serious problem for Garrod: “water was scarce: in fact, it was issued in half-pints, as we were not allowed to touch the native water.”\(^43\) Garrod and his friends were so desperate, however, that they ignored orders: “We came upon a seepage pond in a farm field, we got down to it and found it had about an inch of green scum on top. We all drank from it though, including the officers.”\(^44\)

Many regulars received hospitable treatment from the friendly local populations who tried to feed and help the British when they could. Major St. John, cold from the night air, “went into a cottage where I begged a chair and sat by the stove. The cottagers were most kind although they were obviously afraid and knew that things were not going well. They provided

\(^40\) Rees, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 7-8.

\(^41\) Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\(^42\) Garrod, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\(^43\) Denore, 4.

\(^44\) Garrod, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
me with coffee for which they refused payment….” 45 The “Old Contemptibles” appreciated the Belgian and French civilians’ help, although the British could not repay it nicely, as Lieutenant-Colonel G. A. Kempthorne, serving with the 1/Lincolns Battalion, stated: “Arrived in evening at village of Inchy. People most hospitable, plenty of wine and eggs. We ill repaid them by shelling their village next morning.” 46

Despite the kind actions by the local populations, the kindness sometimes did not rub off on the B.E.F. soldiers, as Major St. John noted:

Another evil with which we had to contend was the kindness of the inhabitants of the village through which we passed. They all did what they could for the men in the way of offering them fruit and drink, the trouble being that there was not enough to go round and the men used to have a regular sort of free fight for it. 47

Although both the Belgian and French civilians provided much help to the retreating B.E.F., they also caused serious difficulty.

The roads were in a terrible state, the heat was terrific, there seemed to be very little order about anything, and mixed up with us and wandering about all over the road were refugees, with all sorts of conveyances-prams, trucks, wheelbarrows, and tiny little carts drawn by dogs. They were pile[d] up, with what looked like beds and bedding and all of them asked us for food, which we could not give them, as we had none ourselves. 48

Obviously, the British were not the only ones trying to escape the German army: “The progress of the withdrawal was slow owing to the roads being badly congested with vehicles of all sorts, refugees….” 49 H. M Dillon, serving in the 2/Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light


46 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.


48 Denore, 4.

49 Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
Infantry Battalion, wrote, “the rate of marching often impeded by civilian fugitives, so that they barely averaged 2 miles an hour.”\textsuperscript{50}

Despite the obstacle of civilians, the British soldiers noted their plight with affection. The refugees were in pitiful condition, as J. W. Palmer looked upon them and saw “the same heartrenching scenes, the inhabitants still streaming panic-stricken along the roads.”\textsuperscript{51} The regulars felt for these people, and some tried to help. “They were even worse off than we were, or, at least they looked it. We gave the kids our biscuits and “bully,” hoping that would help them a little; but they looked so dazed and tired there did not seem to be much hope for them.”\textsuperscript{52} Although the soldiers felt pity for the refugees, the pity of war dictated that the war came first, as Brigadier-General Rees wrote:

One of the saddest sights that day, was the huge columns of refugees on the main road to Guise. Carts heaped with household treasures led by crying women and frightened children. These carts were ruthlessly swept off the road to make a passage for the troops. This was absolutely necessary, of course, in spite of it’s cruelty.\textsuperscript{53}

Though this occurred, Rees demonstrated remorse for its action. Combining all of these sad scenes, Major-General Sir Cecil Lowther described it best:

The whole of the roads are littered with refugees in wagons, carts, bicycles, and on foot, with bundles of pitiful and incongruous belongings. The poor creatures are afraid to stay and fools to go, for they may easily be worse off than at home. But we cannot wonder at their fear when one sees on all sides the flames rising from burning farms and villages and hears the stories of things done by the enemy.\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50} Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{51} Palmer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 6.

\textsuperscript{52} Denore, 7-8.

\textsuperscript{53} Rees, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 12.

\textsuperscript{54} Lowther, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 17-8.
Though the British soldier received reminders about how the war was going when he saw those refugees, the B.E.F. knew all too well what a remarkable feat of endurance they accomplished thus far. Lowther recorded, “They [the refugees] seem to regard us as a beaten army, whereas, as a matter of fact, it has required some skill not to be beaten.”

The B.E.F. withdrew and on occasion lightened their load by discarding unnecessary clothing. One eyewitness reported, “A lot of our men threw away their overcoats while we were on the road today....” This order even came straight from the commander of the B.E.F., Sir John French. C. S. A. Avis remembered: “we were ordered to discard the valises of the webbing equipment containing our [sic] overcoats and other necessities.” The waste seemed to upset Royal Engineer E. S. Butcher who “passed tons of ammunition along the road which our lorries had thrown out in their hurried retreat.” Discarding gear occurred due to orders, but occasions arose where men threw down their gear because of the long retreat. Another aspect of the retreat was the abandonment of packages from home. “A sad though unimportant feature of the retreat was that we had to leave behind for want of transport neatly arrived parcels of comforts, scarves, woolen, helmets etc. that the women of Britain had knitted for us.”

That was more important than Knox Gore Saunders realized because of the obvious implications on the morale of the army. Morale was a major concern during the B.E.F.’s withdrawal, but for the most part, the soldiers performed an orderly retreat.

55 Ibid., 21.
56 Denore, 3.
57 Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
58 Butcher, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
59 Saunders, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
The retreat tested the endurance of the British army to the breaking point but, but the “contemptible little army” did not break. For the wounded, the Mons Retreat was even worse.

Private R. G. Hill, who received a wound in the leg at Le Cateau, wrote:

Then began the retreat. I must have fainted, for I remember hobbling along with some chums, and next I found myself tied to the seat of an ammunition truck. We came to a village jammed with retiring troops, where an artillery officer bundled me off. Fortunately some of my own regiment passed, and seeing me lying in the road, helped me along. My leg seemed easier and I was able to proceed at the pace my footsore companions were going. It was nightmare marching… Sleep was out of the question, and food was begged from villagers. Reaching St. Quentin, we had great hopes of rest, but were told that we were surrounded. We lay down to die through sheer weariness, but a Staff officer rounded us up, and got us out just as the enemy entered. Tramp, tramp, again.60

Captain P. Whitbread of the 3/Coldstream Guards Battalion, also wounded, recorded: “This part of the journey had been very trying, as we could not get enough to eat, and we had no blankets or overcoats, and most of us were cold through having bled a good deal.”61 The non-wounded still showed much compassion. Despite their own sufferings: “It would make you weep to see our wounded with about a foreign… beard on them and clothes torn to bits and no kits.”62 The wounded marched on, however, as E. S. Butcher noted, “one man came up to us and asked us to take him off his horse, we did so and found he was shot in the arms and legs, he could sit on a horse alright, but couldn’t move.”63

Weather contributed to the misery of the B.E.F. The stifling heat of a hot French summer had its way on the British Tommies:


62 Bellew, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

63 Butcher, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
During the Retreat from Mons we endured very long marches wearing full marching order equipment in the Summer heat. When the Battalion was the rear-guard orders were given to fix bayonets and prod along any stragglers. Very few fell by the wayside. We marched for nearly 36 hours without respite or sleep in very hot weather and finally in drenching rain.  

The drenching rains received little appreciation early in the retreat, as Major St. John, trying to sleep one night, wrote: “I could not sleep myself, I was tired enough but it was cold and a steady drizzling rain made slumber in the open impossible….” The August heat wreaked havoc on the men’s endurance; so much so that rain was eventually a welcome relief. Jack Downie echoed this sentiment even as early as August 25 when he wrote, “I never thought I would welcome being soaked to the bone. Good as a bath and twice as refreshing.” It seemed the rain continued into the next day where it rained heavily. Major St. John eventually had little problem sleeping in the rain: “This time I made no bones about it, but lay down on the wet grass by the roadside and rain or no rain went right to sleep.”

The heat, however, returned, and it returned with a vengeance. Major-General Lowther noticed its effect on other battalions besides his own: “cold and foggy early, it soon grew terribly hot and the march was most trying. Most Battalions falling out freely, but mine behaved well and I felt very proud of them.” The heat affected all, including cyclists, as Sergeant T. H. Cubbon, serving with the 15th (Kings) Hussars, noted that same August day: “Terribly hot men

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64 Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
65 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 35.
66 Ascoli, 90.
67 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
68 Lowther, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.
falling all along the road.”\textsuperscript{69} By August 31\textsuperscript{st}, the heat increased, reaching “104 in shade.”\textsuperscript{70} The troops constantly noted the almost oven-like temperatures. Lieutenant-Colonel T. S. Wollocombe, riding horseback, exclaimed, “the heat was suffocating and at every halt I sort of rolled off my saddle and sat in the hedge or ditch feeling half dead. It was about all I could do to climb up into the saddle again.”\textsuperscript{71} Despite the almost ceaseless heat the B.E.F. continued its march to safety, as the lieutenant-colonel exclaimed, “How the men stuck it I don’t, but they were coming along quite well.”\textsuperscript{72}

With a numerically superior German army on their heels, the B.E.F. continued its retreat. Lack of sleep became a serious problem, as Knox Gore Saunders wrote. “Our main trouble was lack of sleep. I often fell asleep on my feet while actually on the march. At our numerous short halts the men just slumped down and fell asleep. The difficulty was to awaken them when the time came to move on.”\textsuperscript{73} Sleep deprivation grew in seriousness: “All of them seemed to become suddenly exhausted and unable to keep up, and from now onwards for a couple of days, my life became a burden to me as I was all the time urging, persuading and even kicking men on.”\textsuperscript{74} Irishman John F. Lucy of the 3\textsuperscript{rd} Division reiterated this sentiment. “Our minds and bodies shrieked for sleep. In a short time our singing army was stricken dumb. Every cell in our

\textsuperscript{69} Cubbon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{70} H. A. Bangert, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{71} Wollocombe, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 54.

\textsuperscript{72} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{73} Saunders, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{74} St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 35.
bodies craved rest, and that one thought was the most persistent in the vague minds of the
marching men.”75

This “sleep-marching” in sweltering heat continued to take its toll, as Sergeant-Major H.
A. Bangert with the Royal Army Medical Corp described himself as “dead tired and half asleep
during this dreary march, more like a nightmare than actual experience.”76

The British began “falling out,” which basically meant a soldier would simply collapse.
Men would often sleep while marching, as one wrote, “every time we stopped (marching) we fell
asleep; in fact we slept while we were marching, and consequently kept falling over.”77 This
became a normal occurrence with the troops: “I had already several times gone to sleep while
marching and had found myself in the ditch.”78 Men relied on each other for help, as Lieutenant
Acland, relying on one comrade named Hammans, recorded, “For long periods Hammans and I
marched arm in arm to keep us from rolling about like drunks.”79 It got worse, especially on
September 3.

The first four or five hours we did without a single halt or rest, as we had to cross a
bridge over the Aisne before the R. E.’s [Royal Engineer’s] blew it up. It was the most
terrible march I have ever done. Men were falling down like ninepins. They would fall
flat on their faces on the road while the rest of us staggered round them, as we couldn’t
lift our feet high enough to step over them, and, as for picking them up, that was
impossible, as to bend meant to fall. What happened to them, God only knows. An
aeroplane was following us most of the time dropping iron darts; we fired at it a couple of
times, but soon lost the strength required for that. About 9 a.m. we halted by a river, and

75 Lucy, 145.

76 Bangert, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

77 Denore, 6.


79 Green, 13.
immediately two fellows threw themselves into it. Nobody, from sheer fatigue, was able to save them, although one sergeant made an attempt, and was nearly drowned himself.⁸⁰

Night marching offered scant relief since the lure of the darkness taunted the soldiers who dared not sleep:

During the night marches… we were literally walking in our sleep. At each 10 minutes halt we dropped as we were in the road and the men started snoring immediately. Riding [a horse] had to be given up as it meant almost certainly falling asleep and rolling off.⁸¹

These sentiments echoed many times in the personal accounts: “All through the night we marched, rocking about on our feet from the want of sleep, and falling fast asleep even if the halt lasted only a minute.”⁸² This placed added responsibility on the officers who had to not only keep themselves awake, but their men as well: “I had a great deal of trouble in keeping the men up in the ranks, and in stopping them throwing away their hachets etc. as they were all dead beat… We spent the most awful night and one fell asleep as one marched.”⁸³ More and more men “fell out” as the retreat continued: “Towards the end we had a field ambulance section behind each brigade which picked up some of the worst cases of exhaustion and carried them along for a bit.”⁸⁴

Despite the hardships, the men continued. Major Lord Tennyson noted the men’s endurance, writing how the marching is “making the men pretty fit.”⁸⁵ Although “it is all work

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⁸⁰ Denore, 6.

⁸¹ Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁸² Denore, 8.


⁸⁴ Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

⁸⁵ Tennyson, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.
and no sleep,” one regular wrote how he got use to it, despite having headaches. Leadership proved, as ever, to be a critical factor: “Remnants of two battalions halted at St. Quentin exhausted and were reluctant to move on. An officer commandeered a toy drum and tin whistle from a nearby shop and with tactful persuasion continued the withdrawal.” At last, on August 29, “a welcome order comes down the line. We have outmarched the enemy, and are to be given a day’s rest.”

The long retreat also took a psychological toll on the troops, and their feet suffered as well. One British regular noted, “It is pitiable to listen to them begging to be allowed to stand and fight. Many of them had tears in their eyes and appeared on the verge of madness.” The feet suffered as well as the mind. In the words of Private Bernard John Denore of the 1/Royal Berkshires Battalion, “One’s feet throb so one can hardly stick it at times.” Even the long-serving soldier felt the pain:

I was an old soldier, at least I thought I was with ten years service. I didn’t drink much, hadn’t gone for promotion, and liked the life. Above all, I kept myself very fit and this was to stand me in good stead with all the marching and fighting. I think I preferred the fighting. At least it took the weight off your feet…. Some men’s feet were in a terrible state and I don’t know how they kept going. The worst ones we put on our transport wagons and even on the guns and limbers of some artillery that was following behind us. We managed an occasional wash in streams and ponds but no one dared take his boots off.

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86 Bellew, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
87 Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
88 Sam Knight, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
90 Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
91 Ascoli, 121.
Private Denore followed that advice: “My own boots would have disgraced a tramp, but I was too frightened to take them off, and look at my feet.”

“Some men had taken off their boots and could not get them on again on their swollen and blistered feet. One man at least walked for three days with his feet bandaged in putties.”

Even the careful Denore could not resist the temptation:

> I, like a fool, took my boots off, and found my feet were covered with blood. I could find no sores or cuts, so I thought I must have sweated blood. As I couldn’t get my boots on again I cut the sides away, and when we started marching again, my feet hurt like hell.

Men, with feet worn raw to the bone, received aid. “Most of these were carried on the transport and I believe the worst cases were taken back by train to the base hospital.”

Many, though, were on their own with their own unlikely demons, their feet. There were those who could not continue, as Major St. John noted:

> I gave up trying to drive men back to the ranks when they fell out, they knew what was in store for them by now as well as I did and I knew the agony they must be suffering from their feet, many of them having raw heels and toes from the hard marching we had done.

> To stop marching, though, meant becoming a prisoner to those “darn Uhlans” as F. M. Packham suggested:

> By this time the continual marching was beginning to play havoc with some of the men’s feet. So it was decided to lessen the load by leaving our Great-coats behind… A party of twelve men were left behind to guard them. These men were picked because of their sore

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92 Denore, 5.

93 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

94 Denore, 7.

95 Ascoli, 140.

96 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 40.
feet and it was impossible for them to carry on any longer. They were taken prisoner by the Germans the same day.\textsuperscript{97} 

Despite the torment, the British army found a way to continue the retreat:

We marched… staggering about the road like a crowd of gypsies. Some of the fellows had puttees wrapped round their feet instead of boots; others had soft shoes they had picked up somewhere; others walked in their socks, with their feet all bleeding… Yet they marched until they dropped, and then somehow got up and marched again.\textsuperscript{98} 

The horses also suffered, which caused more burden on the men. One cavalryman reported, “Horses are getting chafed by the harness and are unable to obtain the rest necessary. It is hellish…. We walk as much as possible to ease the strain on the horses.”\textsuperscript{99} One soldier wrote, “dead horses everywhere and the stink is fearful.”\textsuperscript{100} There was no time, however, to deal with the corpses of dead horses. 

The pursuing German army suffered a similar ordeal, with one important difference. A German officer wrote:

It is the delirium of victory which sustains our men, and in order that their bodies may be as intoxicated as their soul, they drink to excess, but this drunkenness helps to keep them going… Abnormal stimulents [sic] are necessary to make abnormal fatigue endurable.\textsuperscript{101} 

There was no mention of British intoxication in the personal accounts.

Though the performance of the B.E.F. during the Mons retreat aroused admiration, this was not to say the men were completely disciplined. According to Sergeant J. McLlwain, “Much has been written about slackening of discipline about this time. One wonders was it

\textsuperscript{97} Packham, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 6

\textsuperscript{98} Denore, 5.


\textsuperscript{100} Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{101} Ascoli, 141.
some of the comfortable looking staff officers riding about the roads who commented up this."102

A major complaint by officers dealt with the absence of army marching discipline. More
seriously, however, “[t]he men were discarding their equipment in a wholesale fashion, in spite
of orders to the contrary.”103 Even looting took place, as Sergeant J. McLlwain confessed:

I did my first looting in a little shop which seemed to have been deserted in a hurry… I
changed the drawers I had brought from Newcastle nearly a month before for a fine new
pair from stock. It is a queer experience the first time, to be infected with the looting
fever.104

Sir Cecil Lowther also commented on this, noting the British “artillery are terrible looters
as a general rule.”105 A few risked the lives of their fellow soldiers for selfish desire after a hard
march.

They were too tired and too soared to talk though this did not prevent one or two
thoughtless selfish idiots from striking a match to light his fag with. This was invariably
followed by the low murmur of the stream of suitable invective uttered by the offenders
platoon or company commander. It is an extraordinary thing but in spite of explanations
of the cause of the order forbidding it, one would constantly find some men who would
risk the safety and lives of the entire Army corps by lighting a match, and so disclosing
our very precarious position to the enemy, rather than curb his craving for his pernicious
woodbine.106

Staff officers tried to maintain order, appealing to the soldiers’ pride. “‘For God’s sake
men, be British soldiers,’” shouted one officer, but his voice went mostly unheard.107

102 McLlwain, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 12.

103 Denore, 4.


106 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 34.

107 Lucy, 142.
Misconduct received firm punishment, though: “I was sent with six men on outpost to a small wood on our left front, and I had not posted the sentries more than half an hour, before an officer found two of them asleep. The poor fellows were afterward tried by courts martial and shot.”

Misconduct like these received notice by some of the higher commanders in the British Expeditionary Force, as Sir John French himself heard about them. “Smith-Dorrien came in whilst I was with Haig. He tells me that in his Corps discipline is suffering. The shortage of officers demoralize the men. A great deal of looting irregularity is going on…. This is very unfortunate but it is a characteristic of War.”

Despite the scattered lack of discipline, the British Expeditionary Force maintained its professionalism through its first trial by fire.

I have seen the infantry in great stress upon the great retreat, but the whole has proved a fine record of endurance, marching practically night and day from Givey, Mons, with very little sleep, and always on the alert the face of great masses of hostile troops.

Such a view received strong support from the soldiers themselves. One regular sapper with the Royal Engineers, J. Woodhead, referred to the retreat as “not a bad march… thanks to the fitness of the men and the contemptible little army.” The soldiers seemed very disciplined and possessed a strong will to complete their mission. Private Denore kept himself going: “The marching was getting on everyone’s nerves, but, as I went I kept saying to myself, ‘If you can force your heart and nerve and sinew.’ Just that, over and over again.”

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108 Denore, 8.
109 Ascoli, 142.
112 Denore, 6.
kept themselves going, but inspired others: “One man (Ginger Gilmore) found a mouth-organ, and, despite the fact that his feet were bound in blood-soaked rags, he staggered along at the head of the company playing tunes all day.”113 Less appreciated by his men though none the less inspirational were the words of an NCO: “A sergeant irritated everyone who could hear him by continually shouting: ‘Stick it, lads. We’re making history.’”114 The soldiers soon earned the praise of their motivators, as Brigadier-General Rees noted: “The determination of the men during the retreat passed all belief.”115 Officer leadership became a critical reason for the success of the Mons retreat, as Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne wrote: “The constant stopping to see exhausted men on the road most tiring. Managed to get a very large proportion of our own men along by persuasion.”116

Lieutenant-Colonel T. B. Butt, became a prisoner during the early stage of the retreat, but he summed up the B.E.F. later in life:

You say what heroes we old contemptibles were. I think that it is an overstatement. It would be accurate and true to say without boasting that we were very highly trained and disciplined with the right sort of friendly discipline obtaining throughout the regiments. Except for being desperate tired and very hungry it never felt even to the youngest of us any different to any day on manoeuvres except it was the real thing and sickening seeing ones friends of all () lying dead.117

113 Ibid.

114 Ibid., 7.


116 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

117 Butt, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
G. A. Kempthorne reiterated this sentiment: “The last 10 days were on the whole more like a nightmare than anything else. Constant night and day marches with frequently nothing to eat for 24 hours at a time. Our men spendid.”118

To achieve this, J. McLlwain, the Scot from Newcastle, suggested that camaraderie played a role. “The details I have left to the imagination. So one may understand that there were cases every day when, through complete exhaustion, men could not put one foot before another if they were to be shot for it. We helped each other.”119

It was not just the “Old Contemptibles” that respected what they achieved as one French cavalry officer noted: “We crossed the route of an English battalion retiring after having suffered very heavy losses. It moved in touching order; at the head, imperturbable, a party of wounded. I ordered a salute to be given to these brave men.”120

By the end of the retreat on September 5, the British Expeditionary Force scarcely resembled the army that had landed on the continent less than a month before. The trials and tribulations took their toll.

Early on this morning reinforcements from England joined us, and the difference in their appearance and ours was amazing. They looked plum, clean, tidy, and very wide-awake. Whereas we were filthy, thin, and haggard. Most of us had beards; what equipment was left was torn; instead of boots we had puttees, rags, old shoes, field boots—anything and everything wrapped round our feet.121

What seemed more amazing was the distance that these men covered during the retreat. Private Denore related how his company covered 251 miles since Mons, and this was not a

118 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
120 Ascoli, 121.
121 Denore, 8.
rarity. “In eleven days we had covered a distance of 300 miles averaging 30 miles a day closely pressed by the enemy.”122 These distances reappeared throughout the personal accounts: “Major Eden says: ‘In the last 16 days we have marched 227 miles and I have had 45 hours sleep (excluding the rest day).’ The actual distance of the march since retirement began is 173 miles in 12 marching days.”123 One anonymous soldier also reflected on the retreat, showing a sense of pride for what the British Army accomplished. “We had then marched between 150 to 150 miles, and had made one of the longest and swiftest, and most successful retreats in history. General French was the man who got us out of what looked a sure death trap.”124 Despite the distance that these men covered, they did not give up but rather finished the course. In the words of C. S. A. Avis, “During the retreat from Mons the Battalion marched some 200 or so miles in 13 days, nearly exhausted, always short of food and sleep; but never demoralized.”125

By September 5, the British Expeditionary Force halted their retreat and turned around to join the French counter-attack. From August 24 at Mons until that point, the British Expeditionary Force overcame the many obstacles of the retreat. As one soldier, listening to General Smith-Dorrien, noted at the end of the retreat: “We had a lecture from our corps commander and he told us it was one of the finest piece of strategy that had ever been accomplished and only our army could have done it against such enormous odds…”126 The “Old Contemptibles” survived the turbulent march, and their professionalism held firm.

123 Dillon, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
124 Miscellaneous 2519, Misc 164 (2519), Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
125 Avis, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
What also helped was the turning tide of the Marne. After a long, exhausting retreat, the British troops desired a turning moment so that they could advance. That moment occurred, providing some relief to the soldiers. Major C. L. Brereton noted that Sunday on 6 September, when he read the first written order since the start of the war: “‘The British Army is now advancing to take the offensive’ and I realized our long retreat was over.”¹²⁷ “We soon realised that the Germans had found out their peril and were retiring,” as Lieutenant G. A. Loyd noted.¹²⁸ He continued, mentioning the cheer in the air as the men were, “…all cheerful at the beginning of an advance after so long a retirement in which some of us had covered together with the forward movement 230 miles in 15 days.”¹²⁹ The mood of the men was noticeably different, as Lt. Loyd wrote, “I could notice the difference in our troops who showed a fine and unusual spirit directly they found themselves marching east and heard the German forces were making all haste in a retrograde movement.”¹³⁰ Captain L. A. Kenny also noted the changing mood:

When we advanced to what was to be the Battle of the Marne, the same men who a few hours previously were all in, finished, were now stepping out jauntily as though they were off to a ceremonial parade. Such is the difference between a demoralizing retreat and a victorious advance.¹³¹

Major J. L. Mowbray concurred:

A great day! Direction of march changed. It has been known (or thought) for some days that Joffre was aiming at an advance of the enemy after the English army, the wings of

¹²⁷ Brereton, 86/30/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 14.
¹²⁸ Loyd, 98/2/1, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 16.
¹²⁹ Ibid.
¹³⁰ Ibid., 17.
the French forces then to close in. This process has evidently not gone as far as was hoped, and there is a weakening of the German advance. We are to turn attack.... 132

Major Mowbray emphasized that point again when he wrote, “Spirits of all much improved today.” 133 H. Spencer also noted the turning of the tide on 5 September at the Marne when he wrote, “we let the Germans know we could advance as well as they. By dinner time we had eight or nine hundred Germans with us and fine men they were too. Some spoke English and had been London waiters.” 134

The professionalism of the British soldier received a boost with the German withdrawal from the Battle of the Marne. It was needed because the retreat was not the only heroic aspect of this time frame.

The Stand at Le Cateau

One of the critical events during the Mons Retreat was British II Corps’s stand at Le Cateau, made by Smith-Dorrien against his superior’s wish. Independently of GHQ, Smith-Dorrien decided his corps could retreat no more, and so stood and fought at Le Cateau on August 26th. Three days after Mons, II Corps could march no further. It stood against von Kluck’s I Army at Le Cateau on the anniversary of the Battle of Crecy. The numbers engaged on the British side, and the casualties, were almost exactly the same as at Waterloo: 30,000 and 8,000. As author David Ascoli noted: “Le Cateau… exemplifies, within a comparatively small

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133 Ibid., 16.

134 Spencer, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London. The reader may notice that Spencer is suggesting that there is less of an “us versus them” issue with the Germans by writing how some of the German soldiers had connections to the British.
compass, all the exceptional qualities of the old Regular Army—steadiness, discipline and the
virtue of true professionalism.¹³⁵

The night before the 568th anniversary of the Battle of Crecy, British II Corps, after
retiring for two days, with many of its units scattered and exhausted, received orders from Smith-
Dorrien to stand and fight. As Private Hill of the recently arrived 4th Division recalled:

We detrained just outside Le Cateau station (August 24th). The town was in confusion, as
Mons had just been fought; refugees, troops, and ammunition columns creating a dust
that choked us. Civilians offered us foaming jugs of weak beer, but discipline was so
strong that to accept it meant a court martial.¹³⁶

Private Hill soon received his first taste of combat after digging in.

At noon (August 25th) we halted, piled arms, and rations were issued—the last for many
days. Men were told off to dig trenches on rising ground to our left. Whilst so engaged
an aeroplane hovered over us. It had no distinguishing mark, and we thought it was
French, but were soon disillusioned, as it scattered coloured lights over us. Too late, we
opened fire. Soon large black shells were bursting in the beet field just in front of our
improvised position. Rain then started, the shelling ceased... We stayed there till
nightfall, incidentally wiping out a small Uhlan patrol that blundered upon us.¹³⁷

Afterwards, Hill and his company withdrew to a better location; meanwhile, II Corps began
arriving. Their condition was one of exhaustion. The last few days took its toll on the men, as
Jack Tyrrell reported upon arriving at Le Cateau.

I’ve never been so tired, and that went for the rest of us. We had been on the go for what
already seemed like weeks. There had been quite a few casualties and some of the older
ones had fallen out on the line of march. One especially I remember being hungry and
thirsty. I don’t think we had had a square meal for two days and just when we got to Lee
Catoo and thought we were in for a rest and some grub, we were sent on to a ridge across
the river [the Selle] with some of the East Surreys. There I sat down and in no time at all
I was asleep.¹³⁸

¹³⁵ Ascoli, 101.
¹³⁶ Hill, 11.
¹³⁷ Ibid.
¹³⁸ Ascoli, 96.
Trooper W. Clarke with the 2nd Dragoon Guards (Queen’s Bays), 1st Cavalry Brigade, reiterated the weariness of the troops: “It was all very confused and there was lots of blokes just lying around in the street. They look as tired and as browned off as us.”

These conditions led Smith-Dorrien to conclude that his corps could not retreat anymore, and so stood and fought at Le Cateau on August 26. General Sir Edmund Allenby, Commander of the Cavalry Division, told Smith Dorrien that his four brigades were in a scattered and exhausted state because of the retreat. The 2/Royal Irish Rifles did not even arrive at Caudry until 9 a.m. on the day of the battle. The generals under Smith-Dorrien reiterated the idea that their men were in no position to move on. The Germans, meanwhile, were at their heels. A continuation of the retirement spelled certain doom for the outnumbered British.

According to David Ascoli and John Terraine, Smith-Dorrien’s decision was one of the boldest decisions a corps commander made throughout the war. This was especially true considering British I Corps would be unavailable for support. There was little disagreement among

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139 Clarke, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

140 See Ascoli, The Mons Star; Holmes, Riding the Retreat; and Terraine Mons: the Retreat to Victory for more in depth analysis.

141 This is a subject that is very well covered by the works mentioned in the previous note. Smith-Dorrien’s decision was in direct violation with Sir John French’s order to continue the retreat, and this caused a rift between the two that increased until Smith-Dorrien’s removal from command in 1915. I choose not to go into further detail about the decision and the correspondence between French and Smith-Dorrien because it does not deal with the regular soldiers and because it has been covered thoroughly in the works cited.

142 Sir John French ordered I Corps to retire east of the Forest of Mormal while II Corps retired west. The forest was ten miles long and five miles wide. This was necessary due to the crowded conditions of the roads. There were no viable roads running north and south through the forest; therefore, the army corps would be isolated for eight days, August 25th-September 2nd, from each other. This was the situation on the night of August 25.
historians that this decision allowed the British Army to save itself from destruction, but the risk was enormous.143

One unknown soldier of the South Lancasters Battalion noted, “The Generals had put their heads together as General Smith Dorrien told us later and decided to strike a blow.”144 After receiving the new orders, the men prepared to face their pursuers. Major St. John described the night prior to the stand: “We got to bed at 10.0 with orders to turn out at 2.0 and to sleep in our equipment which we did. As soon as we turned out we got the order to turn in again and stand to Arms as usual at dawn.”145 St. John then received a change of orders: “We turned out again at daybreak and had some breakfast and were told that we were to dig ourselves in near by.”146 Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne also described the preparations: “We were scarcely in our billets when we were out again at dawn to dig trenches on the high ground half a mile behind the village [Inchy].”147 Due to the lack of time given to prepare for the expected attack, the defenses seemed primitive, as Fred Petch of 2/Suffolks Battalion stated, “The thing was to throw up a sort of parapet and to keep your head and your bum down.”148 Another problem with the preparation was, despite raining the previous evening, there were places with very hard ground.

143 The only criticism of Smith-Dorrien in this decision is that he delayed too long in making. David Ascoli wrote on pp. 96-7, “by the time the new orders to stand and fight reached his scattered brigade there was little opportunity to make anything other than the most elementary defensive preparations; some units, in the general confusion, were already acting on earlier orders to retire…”


145 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

146 Ibid.

147 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

148 Ascoli, 97.
That did not stop the digging, however, as Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne noted, “trenches, support and reserve trenches, and even dummy trenches had been dug.”

Major E. G. Lutyan of the Cavalry Brigade, 5th Division thought Le Cateau a “hopeless place to hold.” Smith-Dorrien agreed, and that was why he avoided Le Cateau. The general considered the town a “death-trap,” especially since it was in a hollow valley. The battle occurred to the west of Le Cateau, with the town of Caudry being near the center. The area, as one veteran noted, was “Salisbury Plain without the trees.”

The British army divisions that were in Le Cateau were ready: 4th Division on the left, 3rd Division in the center, 5th Division on the right near Le Cateau, and the Cavalry Division spread out. These four divisions faced seven divisions of the German army, with a tremendous concentration of artillery and at least another division showing up by early afternoon. With the numerical superiority the German I Army possessed, the British troops stood little chance. As one noted, “it is said by some that through the course of the entire war never were British troops as heavily outnumbered.” That, however, was why they fought the battles--one never knew.

On the right, the 5th Division stood faced the heaviest enemy artillery barrage. Lieutenant Rory Macleod of the Cavalry brigade wrote: “The drill throughout was admirable. All the men,

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149 Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
151 Ascoli, 97.
152 Ibid., 99.
153 Lucy, 143.
in spite of the shelling and casualties were as calm, quiet and steady as if on a gun parade."\textsuperscript{154}

By noon, however, the mood changed, as reported by George Reynolds of the King’s Own Light Yorkshire Infantry Battalion, 13\textsuperscript{th} Brigade: “It was as if the referee had blown his whistle. We lay there and wondered what the second half would be like.”\textsuperscript{155} Unfortunately, Fred Petch found out the answer to that question soon afterwards:

I was firing away at some Germans trying to creep up a little gully to my right when I was hit by two machine-gun bullets. One ricocheted off the stock of my rifle but the other whizzed through my left hip and out through my right leg, which left me pretty well paralysed. There was no way anyone could move me, and I was picked up later that evening by the Germans.\textsuperscript{156}

Fighting became quite fierce on the right, west of Le Cateau, and even British soldiers from the other divisions noted fire display on their right. C. L. Brereton wrote, “The 5\textsuperscript{th} Division, on our right, appeared to get it extremely hot…”\textsuperscript{157} Major St. John agreed, “there was much commotion away on our right and a hot fight seemed to be going on there.”\textsuperscript{158} The 5\textsuperscript{th} Division withstood the falling shells and German assaults stubbornly, but it took its toll. Of the 38 guns lost that day by the British, 27 of those were in 5\textsuperscript{th} Division sector. They fought on. One German officer who fought against them, recalled their tenacity:

I did not think it possible that flesh and blood could survive so great an onslaught. Our men attacked with the utmost determination, but again and again they were driven back by those incomparable soldiers. Regardless of loss, the English artillery came forward to protect their infantrymen and in full view of our guns kept up a devastating fire.\textsuperscript{159}

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\textsuperscript{154} Ascoli, 100.
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\textsuperscript{155} Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{156} Ibid., 105.
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\textsuperscript{157} Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 3.
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\textsuperscript{158} St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
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\textsuperscript{159} Ascoli, 100.
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Meanwhile, in the center, the 3rd Division came into action.\footnote{For the 3rd Division, the battle opened with an artillery barrage that lasted until approximately noon, and then the German infantry began to advance.} The Germans’ artillery barrage wreaked serious destruction, as John F. Lucy bared witness, “The streets nearer us began to melt away.”\footnote{Lucy, 130.} Even with the widespread “storm of steel,” Lucy recalled, “… a cock crowed close at hand. I hoped he would not crow three times. I don’t know why.”\footnote{Lucy, 133.} Despite the barrage, the men held their ground and waited. Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne noted, “By the time the enemy began to appear in small parties over the hill on the other side of the village we had things ready for them.”\footnote{Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.} The men were ready to fight.

As the great grey clad figures came over the crest in open order, our guns opened… The Germans, as seen through field glasses, looked distinctly foot sore, but, though several fell, they showed no hesitation in their advance. Soon they could be made out in some numbers dodging behind the corn stooks. They worked through the village in spite of our artillery fire, and a party with a machine gun established themselves in the garden of one of the houses while some \textit{Jaegers} made excellent shooting at the heads of those of our men which appeared above the parapet…. The German machine gun was knocked out and the two field guns they had were doing little damage.\footnote{Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.}

Those German guns caused damage to John F. Lucy’s comrades, however:

Then we got it. We were struck down as if by a stroke of lightning. A heavy shell exploded just over our heads, and we were all knocked flat on the pavement, where bricks and pieces of mortar rained on us. I rose slowly and waited for the others to get up.\footnote{Lucy, 134.}

Only three others in Lucy’s section survived.
The Battle of Le Cateau was not without “old-school” fighting, as Lucy described what another regular told him: “A young officer... led an assault and had killed a German officer with his sword. The German officer had run him through the thigh in a duel.”

Others, like one unknown regular, stood ready with his regiment in reserve; his commander had good reason to send the unknown soldier’s regiment in reserve, though, because of Mons. “My regiment was 121 strong out of II, or two, hundred and our colonel told us he could not take us in the firing line so we went in reserve on some cross-roads.” Major St. John also stood in reserve with his company, but he found that it was not as safe as it seemed.

We lay down under cover of the embankment and I went to sleep again but was woken by the explosion of a shell. Apparently a Taube had found the sunk[en] road and the enemy were shelling it. I clung very close to the ground and got off but we had several casualties in the company.

Despite that episode, Major St. John found the center of the battle to be less heated than the flanks, and the British center held firm. “We lay there most of the day, nothing much seemed to be happening where we were except occasional bursts of rapid fire from our trenches and a shell or two from the enemy....” Although the 3rd Division saw less action during the battle, they possessed many heroes to come when it was time to disengage from the enemy.

On the left, the 4th Division faced some flanking attempts by the Germans, as Major C. L. Brereton with the 14th Brigade noted:

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166 Lucy, 138.


168 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32.

169 The Germans were trying flanking maneuvers on the British; therefore, the center was the least heated area.

170 St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
Enemy’s Infantry soon poured over the crest, but we engaged these with great success, and they retired back over the crest. This was repeated a little later on. We were not being shelled, and about 10.0 a.m. got the order to retire to a position about 1 mile South.  

The fighting continued, and the “iron rain” began. Brereton continued, “About 2. P.m. the Germans apparently got their guns up, and for the rest of the day the whole English line was very heavily shelled.” Though the German bombardment was inaccurate at first, that soon changed: “After a hostile aeroplane had been over, the fire became more and unpleasantly accurate.”

Though they fought with valor, the numerical superiority of the Germans could not be ignored, as Brereton noted, “Infantry were coming hurriedly down the slopes toward us and through us. Most of them looked quite exhausted, and it was evident that they had been badly cut up.”

Private R. G. Hill described his adventure in what he later found out to be this great stand at Le Cateau.

We had been marching along a road with a high ridge on the right and cornfields on the left. High up the ridge ran a road parallel to ours, on which one of our regiments had been keeping pace with us. We had no sooner sunk down in the cornfield on our left than shrapnel began to burst over us. Our officers were fine leaders. “Man the ditch on the road,” came the order.

A squadron of “Uhlans” caught the regiment on the high, parallel road napping, and Hill’s officers wanted to help.

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172 Ibid., 3-4.
173 Ibid, 2.
174 Hill, 12-3.
175 Ibid.
Our eager young officers went frantic with excitement. On their own initiative they led up the hill to the rescue of our comrades. With wild shouts we dashed up. At first the ground was broken and afforded cover for our short dashes. We then came to a hedge with a gap about four yards wide. A dozen youngsters made for the gap, unheeding the advice of older soldiers to break through the hedge. Soon that gap was a heap of dead and dying as a machine gun was trained on it.\footnote{176}

The carnage for the British did not end, as Private Hill found out:

We reached an open field, where we were met with a hail of shrapnel. Officers were picked off by snipers. A subaltern rallied us and gave the order to fix bayonets. A piece of shrapnel carried half his jaw away. Upwards we went, but not a sign of a German. They had hidden themselves and waited for our mad rush. Officers and sergeants being wiped out and knowing where the enemy really were, our attack fizzled out.\footnote{177}

The slaughtered men received the orders to retreat: “The survivors walked slowly down, puzzled and baffled. They had attained nothing, and had not even seen the men they set out to help. We lost half the battalion in that wild attack.”\footnote{178}

Hill and his comrades learned a bitter lesson in that fiasco, but they had no time to reflect:

The survivors, under the direction of a capable major, dug in and waited to get their own back. A battery of our eighteen-pounders started to shell the ridge. Suddenly shells started falling round the guns. One direct hit and a gunner’s leg fell amongst us. The battery was wiped out. Tired and worn out, we waited. Towards afternoon shrapnel played on us, fortunately without serious result.\footnote{179}

Hill and his friends got their chance, though Private Hill took a hit:

Then it was our turn to laugh. German infantry were advancing in close formation. They broke at our first volley. Something seemed to sting my leg. I found a shrapnel bullet had ploughed a shallow groove down the fleshy part of my thigh. The enemy advanced. Another volley and they broke again.\footnote{180}
Rifleman George Cox with the 1/Rifle Brigade, saw a similar sight. “They came at us in what looked like their thousands but despite losing a lot of men, we managed to hold them off and our gunners, catching them in the open, gave them a real pasting.”

Despite the successes of the British, the Germans kept coming. The carnage that took place on this day seemed unending, and the situation seemed dire for II Corps.

Smith-Dorrien, realizing the desperate fighting on his right flank, gave the order to retreat. The British slowed a numerically superior army to a halt, but now a difficult task awaited them. The “Old Contemptibles” faced the problem of disengaging from the enemy. Smith-Dorrien ordered the retreat at 1:40 p.m. The disengaging started from right to left, with 5th Division first to retire. Most of the division escaped quite smoothly, with the exception of the 2/KOYLI. They never received the orders to retire. By after 3:30 p.m., the Germans surrounded this battalion, and only 8 officers and 320 men survived, including the aforementioned George Reynolds.

The 3rd Division in the center retired next, as Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne described:

The men were shooting steadily and seemed full of confidence. Suddenly the telephone bell in the CO’s trench rang. “Owing to the withdrawal of the 5th Division the brigade

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181 Ascoli, 110.

182 He ordered the retreat after he received a message from the 5th Division stating the dire situation they were in.

183 Ascoli, 109.

184 There seems to be some questions as to why large groups of British men never received retirement orders. David Ascoli suggests the reason was due to the lack of superior lines of communication, not because the British broke. He clearly states the British line did not break. With the reoccurrence of this problem, one must believe that the line did break. Pockets of men would not receive retirement orders if there were holes in the line. See Barbara Tuchman’s *The Guns of August*, 399-400 and John Keegan’s *The First World War*, 112-3.
will retire on Clay.” The order had scarcely gone out when the Brigade Major [who was immediately shot] appeared from over the hill on his horse along the line of trenches shouting to us to retire.\textsuperscript{185}

Kempthorne continued, describing how the men reacted to the order:

We rose as one man and went, leaving tools and reserve ammunition piled up in the trenches [they were ordered to do so], and also one of our machine guns. As we went up the slope we were heavily fired on from the Village having several casualties, but once over the crest, instead of the hail of shrapnel one expected, there was a clear field.\textsuperscript{186}

One could not imagine the anxiety these men faced when they tried disengaging the enemy. With their backs to their foes, these British soldiers retreated—all the while thinking a bullet would find them in the back, as Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne feared, “The dash up the hill was extremely unpleasant with the momentary expectation of a bullet in ones back.”

St. John’s company, which served in reserve during the battle, received orders to cover the retirement.\textsuperscript{187} He and his comrades shortly faced their work: “The Germans advanced to within 1000 to 1200 yards of us and blazed away at them, but did not seem to do much damage as the enemy were in pretty extended order.”\textsuperscript{188} His company helped cover the retirement, and saw the “Uhlans” from a distance. Noting the scenery, St. John wrote how he, “could see the Germans all over and around the position which we had left while the whole country side was well besprinkled with burning farms etc.” His company heard stories and rumors of the day: “Here we came upon other troops who told us unpleasant stories of defeat which seemed to be

\textsuperscript{185} Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{187} St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32-3.

\textsuperscript{188} Ibid.
more or less corroborated by the numbers of small bodies of straggling troops which kept passing us."\(^{189}\)

There were more units who never received the order to pull back. The 1/Gordons Battalion, 2 companies of 2/Royal Irish Battalion, and a party of 2/Royal Scots Battalion, a total group of about 1,000 men, never received the word to retire.\(^{190}\) They held on until 3:00 a.m. the next morning. Only 200 or so men escaped while 500 were taken prisoner, and the 1/Gordons ceased to exist as a battalion. One unknown soldier in the next brigade possibly saw one of these survivors when he wrote: “A gunner I spoke to who was carrying the sights in his hands told me that him and a trumpeter was all that was left of his battery and the latter was serving the gun when a shell came and blew his head off.”\(^{191}\)

The 4\(^{th}\) Division got away with fewer difficulties than the other divisions experienced, but it had difficulty, as Major Brereton noted.\(^{192}\) He and his fellow soldiers were to rendezvous with the rest of 4\(^{th}\) Division, but problems arose:

> We wasted some time however, and consequently lost the whole of the Division, got blocked by Cavalry on the road, wandered all round the place lost our way sometimes, and half the battery at others. A perfectly miserable night. It[We] was[were] dead beat having done all the shooting all day, and had no rest and practically no food. At any halt I always went off to sleep….\(^{193}\)

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\(^{189}\) St. John, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 32-3.


\(^{191}\) Misc. 94, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 4.

\(^{192}\) Brereton, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\(^{193}\) Ibid.
Despite the problems and sacrifices II Corps held the Germans up and got away. One unknown regular wrote that “the 26th of August [was] the worst day of all which was most disastrous for us.”\(^{194}\) That day tried the soul of the British soldiers who were there. As R. G. Hill penned: “I learnt afterwards that all our wounded were captured that night, and small bodies of our troops, trying to retire in the darkness had fired on each other. This was our part in the Battle of Le Cateau.”\(^{195}\)

Few realized how close II Corps came to disaster; Lieutenant-Colonel Kempthorne wrote, “It was not till later we learnt that we were a small incident in the battle of Cambrai-Le Cateau, and what a near shave we had.”\(^{196}\) Though it was not a textbook stand, Smith-Dorrien succeeded in stopping three German corps. Jack Tyrrell, suffering from wounds, noted the German halt: “I wasn’t badly hurt, but I couldn’t use my rifle. If the Germans had really come after us, they would have eaten us alive. Why, when we got back to the main road, we even had time for a proper meal before marching off again!”\(^{197}\)

But the Germans did not come, simply because they received another sting from the elusive British army. There were German officers who actually thought the British were still in their positions, and other German officers feared taking the risk of going after the “Old Contemptibles” and suffering further. The German numerical superiority did not achieve a knock out blow, again, as historian, David Ascoli, wrote, “It should have been more than enough to achieve a crushing defeat. It was not. The B.E.F. survived, dealing the enemy another smashing

\(^{194}\) Misc. 94, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London, 3.

\(^{195}\) Hill, 13.

\(^{196}\) Kempthorne, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.

\(^{197}\) Ascoli, 103.
blow, and so lived to fight another day.”198 According to the Official History, “The whole of Smith-Dorrien’s troops had done what was thought to be impossible. With both flanks more or less in the air, they had turned upon an enemy of at least twice their strength; he struck him hard, and had withdrawn.…”199

The B.E.F. within the ranks that fought at Le Cateau lost about 8,000 men, or 20%, of their manpower.200 The German figures, however, remained silent on their losses. British II Corps for the rest of the retreat saw very little of von Kluck’s army, and Le Cateau was the reason. They made their stand, the stand that saved an army.

Conclusion

The British professional soldier demonstrated effective soldiery during the retreat from Mons and the Battle of Le Cateau. Despite the hardships of the retreat, the British demonstrated resilience and effective soldiery. They were professional soldiers, but they were also members of the British nation. That nation provided an idea for which the British soldier would fight. They sacrificed for the good of their comrades. They sacrificed for the good of “king and country.” They sacrificed for the good of the British nation. One regular recorded a poem of praise for the “Old Contemptibles:”

O little might Force that stood for England
That, with your bodies for a living shield,
Guarded her slow awaking, that defied
The sudden challenge of tremendous odd,
And fought the rushing legions to a stand,
Then, stark in grim endurance, held the line,

198 Ascoli, 99.


200 Tuchman, 399-400.
O little Force that in your agaony [sic] stood fast
While England girt her armour on
Held high our honour in your wounded hands
Carried our honour with bleeding feet—
We have no glory great enough for you. 201

The author of the poem remained unknown, but the author, like the combatants he described, was part of the British nation.

201 Lutyan, Documents, Imperial War Museum, London.
CONCLUSION

Was historian John Keegan right all along in his brief summary of the early fighting of World War I? As previously stated, he argued three themes: the impressive quality exhibited by the professional British soldier, the barbarity of the German army, and the disorganization of the French Army until the Marne?¹ There was some truth to his statement. How did this happen? Differences in training, equipment, and ideas about the nation resulted in diverging experiences for the British, French, and German soldiers in 1914.

Keegan’s idea only touched the surface of the story. The story involved gambling. All three armies and states wagered that preparations they had undertaken before the conflict would accomplish their goals, but they all approached the table differently. The German Army gambled on the Schlieffen Plan, which required extreme energy from the soldiers, a fixed timetable, and an adherence to the notion of winning at all costs, or “military necessity.” Germany banked on the plan and lost. Three issues surrounded this failure. Germany possessed neither the resources nor manpower in 1914 to carry out the plan. Germany overestimated its capabilities, especially with regard to the daunting task its soldiers faced. Finally, the German Army may have underestimated the enemy. Germany wagered against time and logistics that plans, numbers, fire-power, and German nationalism would pave the way to a quick victory in the west. They did not. Schlieffen may have been right all along when thinking Germany was ill-suited to win a war of attrition. Even after gamble did not “pay off,” the Germany of World War I would not listen.

¹ Keegan, The First World War, 71-137.
In addition, the German Army acted in a barbaric fashion compared to the British and French armies. It, however, was in the peculiar situation of being the only army among the three which was operating in truly hostile territory. The barbarity of the German soldiers existed due to several reasons: the impressive equipment the army possessed (which allowed for more destruction), training, “military necessity,” and romantic nationalism.

In standing up to the Germans, the French, meanwhile, wagered that spirit would counterbalance inferiority in numbers, equipment, and preparation. French equipment, compared with that of the German army, proved to be inferior. Deficiencies such as uniforms, machine guns, and artillery existed. Plan XVII played right into the Schlieffen Plan’s hand. French planning did not help, either. Indiscipline and issues with command both appeared during the training process. This may have been the cost for emphasizing quantity over quality to keep pace with the Germans, whose larger population yielded more soldiers. Spirit, however, remained, and it carried the day for the French. Despite early defeats, the French soldiers halted the German offensive at the Marne, and with that, ended the hopes of the Schlieffen Plan. This French spirit was fueled by both a devotion to the hybrid of romantic-rational nationalism and a commitment to camaraderie. The French wager “paid off,” but the winnings proved costly. In the long run, the price of victory was too high, in lives and treasure, and the Pyrrhic victory in World War I contributed to the mood of national defeatism in the 1930s.

The British wagered as well. The island nation did not want to finance or maintain a large standing army, and the British did not like conscription. They hoped to avoid war, but they also wanted to make sure that if Germany went to war, it would not overrun Western Europe and consolidate its hegemony on the continent. Consequently, the British created a relatively small, professional army, hoping that the force would be large enough to tip the balance in the great
continental struggle. In some respects, the wager paid off. The British did make a decisive contribution to blunting Germany’s initial offensive in the war, and this did ultimately lead to an Allied victory, albeit much later, and after much greater sacrifice than anybody bargained prior to the war. The British soldiers demonstrated the impressive quality of professionalism during the early campaigns. Despite the disadvantage in terms of numbers and artillery, they overcame the obstacles of combat due to training, rational nationalism, and professionalism. The British wagered that a small, professional force could aid the French in preventing a German victory. This proved to be true.

The mobile phase of World War I provided the time-frame to demonstrate these points. This micro-history, despite its limitations, argued as much. Stalemate and attrition were yet to come. Mobility was the name of the game from August to November of 1914, and all armies experienced similar situations: going through the training process, enthusiasm, marching to the front, retreating, advancing, and settling into a fixed position. Other commonalities existed. The influence of camaraderie appeared in all three soldiers’ accounts, and it garnered the most support within military scholarship on producing efficient soldiery. All soldiers faced obstacles of war, including their baptism of fire, but training helped dictate how the soldiers would respond. Accounts of heroism and courage existed in each of the nations’ armies. Nationalism existed for all three armies. Feelings toward the nation played a role for the British, French, and German soldiers.

Still, dissimilarities remained. The equipment amidst the three armies differed, and it resulted in influencing soldiers’ experience of war differently. The affair of training also diverged, and it contributed to variations in wartime experience. The disparate situation of geography shaped the mindset of the three nations as they approached the impending war. The
dissimilar types of nationalism that evolved in British, French, and German culture by 1914 shaped the wartime experience of their respective soldiers differently. The British Army consisted of professionals, or volunteers, while the French and German armies relied on conscription. The German soldiers entered truly hostile territory, yet the British and French did not reach that far. The latter two fought the war on friendly ground.

Other variables existed. Nationalism was real and modern. The start of World War I saw the culmination of this movement. At least three different types of nationalist movements existed, as demonstrated by the British, French, and German versions of nationalism. The influences of the Enlightenment and Romanticism affected which version the nation would choose. A sense of “Britishness” did, in fact, exist. The French nationalism was a hybrid indeed, a combination of both the British and German models. German nationalism allowed for mistreatment of civilians, but to what extent was debatable. The other influencing factors in the German soldiers’ interaction with civilians involved time, fear, and “military necessity.” The clock was ticking for the German Army, and it demonstrated a Machiavellian attitude in order to accomplish its goal. Fear of the outside world tearing apart the German nation also manifested itself. In addition, the army operated outside the law, both German and International.

Baptism of fire served as a measuring stick in terms of understanding the true psyche of combatants. How the British, French, and German soldiers handled the fire demonstrated the roles that equipment, training, and ideas about the nation really played. All three overcame the wartime hindrances, but the British reacted with a professionalism that the conscripted armies of France and Germany could not match, though they could easily match the British in other areas, such as equipment and numbers. The German response proved mixed, demonstrating both disillusionment and continued dedication. At the same time, the German Army engaged in acts
of barbarism. Though the French suffered initially, devotion to the nation and dedication to their comrades paved the way for their rebound.

Further reaching questions stemmed from this ordeal involving how German barbarism fit this equation. Did the barbarity of the German Army influence the outcome of the three national wagers? Did German atrocities stiffen British and French resistance? Did they have an impact on how the British and soldiers fought? Did they influence the rallying of the French at the Battle of the Marne? Did German brutality slow down the German advance or hinder in any way the ability of the German armed forces to wage war? Did it complicate German supply lines though hostile territory? Did it provide insights into how the opening campaigns of the war played out, in sum? The barbaric actions of the German army made an impression on the British and French soldiers. The fact that both not only noted the incidents, but exhibited sympathy and compassion for the victims suggested that they were affected. As suggested in their own words, British soldiers, with notions of professionalism and rational nationalism, abhorred these German atrocities. The French soldiers, many of whom already viewed the Germans with disdain because of recent history, also suggested contempt for what the German Army was doing. How much and whether that translated to a stiffening resistance was debatable.

What seemed less debatable was the effect the actions had on the German soldiers. Accounts of regret and remorse over the atrocities existed. Would that not have affected the psyche of the German soldier? Did the harsh punishment and swift handling of “justice” involving civilian resistance lead to civilian submission or more determined resistance? This tied into the logistical situation with the German Army in hostile territory. More resistance suggested more complications with the German supply lines while less resistance inferred less supply line issues. The answer proved elusive. However, the German Army’s ability to wage
war may have been compromised by its inability to maintain it focus. Random acts of barbarism, specifically rape, took time. Time was something the German Army could ill-afford to waste. The clock was ticking, and every delay helped the forces of its opponents. The Battle of the Marne was not a lop-sided affair. The barbarism of the German Army may have undermined its ability to achieve victory.

Broader reaching ideas about nationalism existed. The type of nationalism present in a society influenced how the soldier behaved. It also contributed in shaping the political and military organizations responsible for war. Nationalist societies that restricted individualism and rationalism proved capable of barbarism. Devotion to the nation mattered in war. French nationalism fared better than German nationalism, as demonstrated by the response of both soldiers after the “baptism of fire.” Why were the French more devoted to the nation? Did this involve the maturity of both nations, as the French version was older? Or, did the answer deal with the more inclusive nature of French nationalism? The British demonstrated devotion to the ideas of “Britishness,” but how much did those ideas, as compared with professionalism, influence their reaction to fire. The answer was uncertain. Calculating the ratio between the two remained elusive.

Notions regarding preparation and soldiery persisted. “Military necessity,” or Kriegeraison, was a dangerous philosophy. Camaraderie proved to be the most fundamental component of soldiery, regardless of nation. Even with issues of indiscipline and command, camaraderie still developed. Yet, issues with command caused indiscipline. Equipment not only contributed to the outcome of war, it also influenced the psyche of the soldier. Combatants recognized the shortcomings, as well as the advantages, of their equipment. Professionalism mattered in combat, but so did devotion to the nation.
Those who survived the mobile phase of 1914 experienced the modernity of warfare. “When you stare into the abyss the abyss stares back into you.” Friedrich Nietzsche’s verse described the next four years for European soldiers. The abyss not only stared, it glared into the soldiers. In the western front, British, French, and German soldiers encountered four more years of conflict. Four years of death, destruction, disfiguring, carnage, madness, loss, lice, mice, and stench waited for those soldiers who survived the war of mobility in 1914. Those “fortunate” survivors experienced the death of the “old Contemptibles” in 1915, the fire and waste of Verdun and the Somme in 1916, the mud of Passchendaele in 1917, and eventual defeat, for the German soldiers, in 1918. Two hundred to three hundred per cent casualty rates among the infantry was not an uncommon theme.² By the eleventh hour of the eleventh day of the eleventh month of 1918, the day World War I finally concluded, the losses seemed absurd. Britain, excluding her empire, lost three hundred thousand men; with her empire, one million.³ France lost 1.7 million men from a population of forty million.⁴ Germany, who held on to the bitterest of ends, lost more than two million men from a pre-war population of seventy million.⁵ John Keegan wrote that the loss of life was “suffice to shatter the spirit of a nation.”⁶

This did not happen. Yes, the war changed the men. Soldiers pondered why the conflict persisted despite the death and destruction.

Who will remember, passing through this Gate,

³ Ibid
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.
The unheroic Dead who fed the guns?
Who shall absolve the foulness of their fate,—
Those doomed, conscripted, unvictorious ones?\(^7\)

The French Mutiny of 1917, which resembled more of a military strike, confirmed the idea that the soldiers grew wearisome of the war, suggesting that nationalism lost its touch.\(^8\)

Europeans in the post-war era hoped the epic conflict truly was “the war to end all wars,” and an era of self-determination would make European peaceful. Militant nationalism as well as nationalism in general seemingly went to the end of the line with the rise of socialism in Britain, the rise of socialism and communism in France, and the Spartacus League threat in Germany. Former soldiers depicted the futility of war in literature and art. Roland Drogelès’s *Le Croix de bois* (1919) and Erich Marie Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* (1929), both of which made the big-screen, demonstrated the horror of war and disillusionment with society. War poet Siegfried Sassoon put the abomination of war to verse. Art changed. Grotesque imagery appeared on canvas rather than colorful water-lilies or umbrella-carrying women in nice dresses.\(^9\)

The culture of nationalism paved the way for World War I, and the experience of World War I altered the culture.

Nationalism remained, however. Even in the “French Mutiny” of 1917, most of the participants still showed willingness to defend France against any German assault.\(^10\) 

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\(^8\) Keegan, *World War I*, 329. Keegan suggested the term mutiny was an inaccurate description, as the French soldiers did not rise up and take over. Rather, the majority of them resisted or refused to follow orders involving any attack.

\(^9\) See the works of Claude Monet and Pierre-Auguste Renoir for pre-war and Paul Nash for post-war, to name a few.

\(^10\) Keegan, *World War I*, 330
the political left occurred in Britain and France, but Imperialism continued stimulating the nationalist spirit. As for Germany, its version of nationalism continued, resulting in Nazism.\footnote{See Peter Fritzsche, \textit{Germans into Nazis}, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press), 1998. For Fritzsche, Nazism was a continuation of nationalism already present in Germany in 1914.} Nationalism went nowhere. In World War II, an event that mirrored 1914 occurred. During the spring of 1940, Germany again launched another invasion of France. The German soldiers faced the British and French soldiers once more. The armies of Britain and France, once more, retreated. This time, however, they lost the wager. France capitulated and the British army fled the continent. What happened? With regard to equipment and numbers, nothing really changed. Germany utilized their equipment better than the British and French, just as it had done in 1914. The British sent a smaller force, just as it had done in 1914. Ideas about the nation still existed. Yet, the experiences of training and culture may have created the contrast. The French soldiers in 1914 experienced the ideology of the offensive; the army utilized an offensive assault in war planning. By 1940, soldiers experienced the “Maginot mentality” where playing defense would accomplish the job. French culture remembered the agony of World War I. The conflict was fought mainly on French soil as opposed to British or German land. Waiting behind the Maginot Line did not work, and France capitulated. But, the French nation did not. The French Resistance, continued, and with that, the French nation did as well.

Tolerance, however, took a hiatus. World War II caused more death, roughly three percent of the earth’s population, mostly civilians. Ethnicity outweighed civility. Professionalism proved subservient to technology and intolerance. Modernity appeared non-progressive. The followers of the ideals of the Enlightenment were not amused. Yet, those followers may have had the last laugh with the rise of the European Union.
represented a new age in nationalism as opposed to its end. Ideas of toleration, individualism, democracy, and inclusion persisted in the new organization, which was comprised of different ethnicities that voluntarily joined. The ideas stemming from “Britishness” and its rational nationalism seemed to expand outside the island.
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