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Maarten Van Alstein

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Front 14-18

The Experience of Battle in WWI and the Fascist Culture of Violence in Post-War Germany

→ Maarten Van Alstein
(Vlaams Vredesinstituut)

This war is not the end but the beginning of violence. It is the forge in which the world will be hammered into new borders and new communities. It is the glowing red of the sunset of a sinking time as well as of the dawn of a new morning, calling for a new, even greater battle. (Jünger 1922/2016, 96)

Ernst Jünger, a Stormtrooper in the German Army during the war of 14-18, wrote these lines in 1922. Using a language of steel, he hammered home his message: although the war had ended in November 1918, the real and violent battle to create a new world and a new man was ongoing. In its stylized boldness, Jünger's was an outstanding voice in post-war Germany. His ideas, however, were not exceptional. Friedrich Wilhelm Heinz, one of the more prominent members of the German *Freikorps*, wrote in his memoirs: "We laughed when they told us that the war was over, because we *were* the war." (cited in Gerwarth 2016, 124)

Originating in ultranationalist and radical circles of war veterans such as the *Freikorps* and the Nazi SA, the "battle rhetoric" spilled into the mainstream German public sphere in the 1920s. Politics came to be seen as a battle that had to end with the utter destruction of the adversary, who was framed solely in terms of an enemy and existential threat. Violent discourses about battle and national "rebirth" led many to wonder whether the war indeed had really ended. In his book *Fallen Soldiers* (1990) George Mosse tried to understand these developments in terms of his "brutalization" thesis, essentially suggesting that the trench experience of the First World War brutalized both soldiers and society by establishing new and unprecedented levels of acceptable violence. This prepared the way for the horrors of the Second World War. Mosse applied his thesis to the German case, but it was later extended by some historians to all of Europe and linked not only to developments in the political sphere but also to rising crime rates and lower thresholds for committing violence.

The brutalization thesis has been met with a fair share of criticism. One important point of critique is that the war experience itself does not account for why politics and society were brutalized in some of the former combatant states, but not in others. After all, as Robert Gerwarth points out, there was no fundamental difference in the war experiences of Allied soldiers and those of the Central Powers. Critics further

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argue that the vast majority of veterans who had fought for the Central Powers and who had survived the Great War returned to relatively peaceful civilian lives in late 1918. They did not all become fascists or members of a *Freikorps* eager to continue the fight beyond the moment of the November 1918 armistice. In order to understand the violent trajectories that Europe (including Russia and the former Ottoman lands in the Middle East) followed in the decades after the end of the First World War, Gerwarth concludes, we should consider less the war experiences between 1914 and 1917 and more the way in which the war ended for the vanquished states of the Great War. Taken together, Gerwarth argues, factors such as defeat, revolution and national “rebirth” in the imperial wreckage of Europe proved to be crucial in triggering a transnational wave of armed conflict after 1918 (Gerwarth 2016, 12-13).

While Gerwarth’s view provides a more adequate reading of the historical record, we should, however, be careful not to rashly cast aside all elements of Mosse’s thesis. Some of them still are insightful. His work in particular allows us to understand how, in the very specific post-war German context of humiliating defeat and revolution, the experience of trench warfare left its mark on a fascist culture of violence, which gained traction in the 1920s and was ultimately taken to unprecedented levels of destructive power by the Nazis in the 1930s and 40s. Drawing on Thomas Kühne’s and Enzo Traverso’s work, this essay reconsiders this culture of violence in light of what Mosse called the “myth of the war experience”. It first examines a number of intellectuals and artists fighting in the trenches who took up ideas of violent renewal and rebirth – ideas that, as Modris Eksteins (2000), Robert Wohl (1979) and Roger Griffin (2007) have shown in a masterly manner¹, were already virulently present in *fin de siècle* Europe. After the war, these ideas would be taken up by ultranationalist and fascist discourses in Germany. Secondly, the essay looks at soldiers’ experiences of trench warfare, not to argue that all combatants became brutalized in the same manner, but to investigate how the war signalled the breakthrough of routinized and mechanized practices of violence and total conceptions of war. Thirdly, the essay analyses how, in the specific situation of post-war Germany, the experience of total war left an imprint not only on a virulent fascist culture of violence but also on practices of totalitarian violence. Thus we can grasp how – as Enzo Traverso has suggested – the First World War can be seen as *a laboratory of fascism*.

IN STAHLGEWITTERN: BATTLE AS AN INTELLECTUAL’S EXPERIENCE

Margaret MacMillan has provokingly claimed that seeing the war through the poetry of Wilfred Owen, who came to prominence decades after his death, is dangerous. The reason, she argues, is that most of the poets who were widely read at the time – notably Rupert Brooke – were writing patriotic verse. The “futility of war” line only emerged later.² Indeed, seeing the history of the war one-sidedly through the lens of a pacifist narrative, and thus emphasizing traumatic victimhood and the senselessness of the conflict, tends to reduce our historical understanding of the war as artists and intellectuals experienced it. Artistic responses to the war of 14-18

have always been very multi-faceted. A broad spectrum of meanings was given in art about the war, ranging from works of bellicose exaltation and patriotic self-denial through the expression of resignation, anguish, grief, rage, and pacifist protest and rejection (Becker 2015, 525).

It is worthwhile to pause and consider non-pacifist types of artistic responses to the war. More specifically, in order to understand the First World War, it is necessary to look at the *aesthetics of violence* which was widespread in artistic and intellectual *milieux* before the war. This distinctly modernist aesthetics hinged upon topoi such as creative destruction, regenerative violence, and rebirth in a new world. War and violence were imagined to be able to cleanse materialist and rational modernity of its decadence and degeneration. Artists and intellectuals who rejected their own era – which was in the grip of the most severe of spiritual crises as far as they were concerned – frenetically longed for the regenerative and redemptive virtues of violent upheaval which would be, depending on their different denominations, a vector of either moral purification, political revolution or aesthetic modernity. The idea was that, through the destruction of the present, it would be possible to move towards the utopia of a new, purer and more modern world. This quasi-eschatological perspective on a future war emerged from a broad spectrum of political affiliations and the most contradictory expectations, ranging from the conservative Pan-Germanists and the *Action Française* to Bolsheviks and Italian futurists (see Sheehan 2013, 135-140). The manifestoes of European modernism are fueled by images of destruction, justifications for belligerence and exhortations to commit acts of violence. The tone was set most infamously by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti in his 1909 Futurist Manifesto, in which he proclaimed that “We will glorify war – the world’s only hygiene – militarism, patriotism, the destructive gesture of freedom-bringers, beautiful ideas worth dying for, and scorn for woman.” (Marinetti 1909/2006, 11; 49)

When war broke out in 1914, this aesthetics of violence, professed by so many artists and intellectuals in the preceding decades, reinforced the cultural unification of the belligerents, supplying the conflict not only with founding myths of a war in defense of a territory, but also with a cultural ideal (Rasmussen 2014, 394-413). Resistance to the war was confined to the margins of intellectual life. The war was seen as just and “cleansing” both at home and on the front line (Becker 2014, 506-507). Indeed, as Robert Wohl states:

Those who lived through the war could never rid themselves of the belief that one world had ended and another begun in August 1914. And part of the appeal of the front derived precisely from the feeling that it was there amid the fire and the flame that the new world was coming into being. (Wohl 1979, 222)

The devastating experience of total warfare in many instances led to a revision of the hopes and fantasies that had been invested in it. Nonetheless, certain pre-war idealistic interpretations bore the test of reality and were even confirmed by the intellectuals’ combat experience.

(1) See also Kieft 2015.

(2) Margaret MacMillan in ‘Just don’t ask me who started the First World War’, *The Guardian*, 25 July 2014.

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The most well-known and most-cited of soldier-intellectuals undoubtedly was Ernst Jünger. In novels such as *In Stahlgewittern* (1920), *Feuer und Blut* (1925) and *Der Kampf als Inneres Erlebnis* (1922), Jünger celebrated the destructive-transgressive aspects of war, especially of close combat, because they precipitated a newer, more authentic personal identity. He framed his *Fronterlebnis* not as an indictment or a protest, but as a mission in life and a source of inspiration. Fatalistic about the destructive force of the *Materialschlacht* and the powerless position of the individual vis-à-vis technology, Jünger exalted the *Ästhetik des Schreckens*, promoting a radical form of nationalism and the *Gestalt* of the worker-soldier. The war was a German revolution and, above all, an aesthetic spectacle (see Boterman 1988). Morality had lost all value, the meaning of battle lay in its sublime beauty. And there was hope of regeneration, as the quote at the beginning of this essay suggests: “This war is not the end but the beginning of violence. It is the forge in which the world will be hammered into new borders and new communities.”

Jünger, admittedly, was one of the most radical and perseverant protagonists of the aesthetics of violence. But there were numerous other artists and intellectuals fighting at the front who detected regenerative possibilities in the horrors of trench warfare. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, for example, a philosophically minded

soldier-priest, wrote in the summer of 1917 about his *nostalgie du front*, noting that “I think one could show that the front isn’t simply the firing line, the exposed area corroded by the conflict of nations, but the ‘front of the wave’ carrying the world of man towards its new destiny.” Moreover:

Not only does one see there things that you experience nowhere else, but one also sees emerge from within one an underlying stream of clarity, energy, and freedom that it be found hardly anywhere else in ordinary life... This exaltation is accompanied by a certain pain. Nevertheless it is indeed an exaltation. And that’s why one likes the front in spite of everything, and misses it. (Teilhard de Chardin 1961, 264-267; translation from Sheehan 2013, 140)

The general idea here is that destruction begets creation. After the war, the discourse about regenerative violence re-affirmed its influence in Germany and Italy, shaping Fascism and Nazism both ideologically and aesthetically. In Italy, Marinetti, who had gone gleefully to war, continued to affirm his violent passions for another quarter century. Fascist Italy was only too eager to be inspired by the futurist’s ideas about the paligenetic forces of violence and war. In 1918, reacting to the Bolshevik revolution in Russia, Benito Mussolini wrote in his newspaper *Il Popolo d’Italia* that this was “not a time for angels, it is a time for devils. It requires ferocity, not humility... It requires a long sword and a great deal of fire.” What was needed was a “nationalist revolution”. Furthermore, the future state would have to be run by the *trincerocrazia* – the “trenchocracy” – a new aristocracy born out of the blood and mud of the trenches (Gerwarth 2016, 160). In Germany, the Nazis would not only see the First World War as the *Urkatastrophe* out of which the political rebirth of Germany would spring, but also they would transfer the idea of purifying violence to a new and unprecedented level of destructiveness.

Of course, before and during the war, adherents of the aesthetics of violence – mostly artists and intellectuals – only constituted a minority of the soldiers at the front. Their thinking is not representative of the experiences of the great mass of common soldiers at the front. Yet it is impossible to understand the roads Europe took to the next world war without looking into these ideas, which had their roots in *fin de siècle* Europe, and were reinforced – for some – through the experience of battle in the trenches of 14-18.

TRENCH WARFARE: EXPERIENCES OF TOTAL WAR

To trace some of the ways in which the experience of trench warfare left an imprint on the post-war fascist culture of violence, we need to take a closer look at how the mass of common soldiers lived through the violence of the First World War. This question has sparked a debate among historians. On the one hand, scholars such as Joanna Bourke, Annette Becker and Stéphane Audoin-Rouzeau claim that most soldiers came to see killing as a job. “The characteristic act of men at war is

– Ernst Jünger

– Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, 1915

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not dying, it is killing” – the opening line of Bourke’s book *An Intimate History of Killing* (2010) sets the tone of her argument. The book paints overall a rather nuanced picture: Bourke writes about the high thresholds people have to pass before being able to actually commit violence, and the fact that many men do not kill personally. Killing, in the author’s view, although always ambiguous and distressing, has a spiritual resonance and an aesthetic poignancy for some, while for those who do not find pleasure in the act of killing, it becomes an act they perform with the sense that it is a distasteful but necessary job (Bourke 2010, 2; 154; 232; 346; 355).

In line with Bourke’s argument, Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau (2010, 14) have posited in their influential work on the war culture of 14-18 that, even if “everyone knows war is violence, and many readily acknowledge this, they refuse to draw the inevitable consequences”. The authors’ analysis of instances of brutal interpersonal violence reveals the cultural and mental representations of the majority of the soldiers. Central to these representations, they argue, is “consent” – the fact that the radical and radically new violence of the war was not only massively accepted by the belligerent societies but also implemented by millions of men from every social group for over four and a half years. Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau believe a red line was crossed during WWI: they point to the firing at stretcher-bearers, the killing of prisoners, and the dirty business of trench-cleaning. Unprecedented violence, they conclude, became integrated with disconcerting ease into the daily life of every civilian and every soldier to the point where it became commonplace, and in the end it was accepted for more than four years, albeit with significant variations.

Other historians have taken issue with some of the claims made by Bourke, Becker and Audoin-Rouzeau. In particular, they have questioned the thesis of the war consensus and general consent among soldiers. André Loez (2014), for example, notes that the questions ceaselessly asked by historians such as “How did they hold?” and “Why did they fight?” are, to some extent, disingenuous. In his view, soldiers fought because it was normal, as combatants in a war, to do so, and most of them found ways to cope with the strains of combat. In the context of the First World War, he states, it is unrealistic to view soldiers as free agents, at leisure to decide whether to participate in the conflict and whose conscious acceptance of the war prolonged its violence. The strength of states, military institutions and social norms were instrumental in shaping obedience and preventing refusal. In 1914-1918, as in all other conflicts, military obedience was indeed the norm – mutiny and refusal were the exception.

Nicolas Mariot is another critical voice refuting the idea that soldiers engaged in brutal violence and killing because they accepted the war consensus. Mariot (2003) argues that soldiers’ violence should not be understood in terms of a prevailing war culture, but rather in light of a sociological reading of killing. In line with a broader literature on collective violence³, he analyzes soldiers’ violent behaviour not only in terms of social group pressures and conceptions of killing as a job that needs to be done, but also of processes of routinization and mechanization.

If we want to understand how trench warfare in the First World War left its mark on fascist predispositions towards violence, the experience of the *routinization* and *mechanization* of violence is an important element to focus on. Enzo Traverso, in his work on the origins of Nazi violence, perceives an anthropological rupture in the experience of the violence of the trenches. The industrialization of warfare changed armies into massive factories of killing. The destruction of the enemy developed along the lines of a production system that took its cue from the paradigm underlying Fordism. Violent death was often not administered by an enemy of flesh and blood, but by strange, threatening and cold machines: artillery, airplanes, tanks, chemical gas and the fire of flame throwers. In an apocalyptical war-torn landscape, soldiers with steel helmets and gas masks looked like mechanical figures, robbed of all humanity (see Traverso 2010, 72-81).

THE FIRST WORLD WAR AS A LABORATORY OF FASCISM

In November 1918 the war ended. Armies demobilized and soldiers turned into veterans. Most of them took up their roles as workers and family men again. The long work of rebuilding and reclaiming some normalcy in daily life began. In Britain, France and Belgium this could take place in a relatively peaceful atmosphere. In Germany the situation was markedly different. The end of the war not only signified humiliating defeat. It also brought the fall of the *Kaiser* and the old order. The vanquished country slipped into a turbulent and confusing spiral of revolution, civil war and hyperinflation. Some years after the armistice, parts of German soil were occupied by allied forces. Dreams about a splendidly unified nation, a *Volks-gemeinschaft* welded together by the “Spirit of 1914” and the cleansing experience of a collective war effort, dramatically imploded.

In this atmosphere of humiliating defeat, revolutionary turmoil and feelings of national fragmentation and disunity, the idea that the war was *not* over took a very strong hold in the nationalist imagination. Spurred by the myth that the German army had not been defeated on the battlefield but instead had been betrayed by ene-

– *Sturmtruppe geht unter Gas vor* [Stormtroops advancing under a gas attack], Otto Dix, 1924

(3) See, e.g., Browning 1998 and Dutton 2007.

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mies *within*, virulent feelings of revenge became widespread among ultra-nationalist war veterans. In their view, the Weimar Republic that had emerged from the violent aftermath of the war became the symbol of painful national dissension and even treason. As Thomas Kühne explains, in this hotbed of resentment, anger and national disintegration, experiences of trench warfare came to perform a specific function in right-wing nationalist discourse. They were translated into a “myth of comradeship” among trench soldiers, according to which only in the trenches the model of a new society, a classless *Volksgemeinschaft*, had come into being. Status no longer relied on differences of wealth or birth there, but was based instead on competence, ambition, and performance, all of which strengthened the kind of community that was the model for future German society. This society would then thrive under the

authority of a charismatic leader, also born in the trenches. This myth allowed many right-wing Germans to cope with the burden of defeat and to establish the prospects of a renewed and reborn collective identity. The imagined spirit of comradeship in the trenches came to serve as a powerful propellant of discourses about making the shattered nation whole again, and about the rebirth of the German nation (Kühne 2013, 1-31). The community of former front soldiers was seen as a redemptive force, the vanguard of the re-born *Volksgemeinschaft*. Right-wing associations of war veterans as well as the infamous *Freikorps*, which came to symbolize the continuation of wartime camaraderie in peacetime, played a crucial role in disseminating these ideas.

In the immediate post-war period, the experience of trench warfare in WWI also left a major imprint on the German ultra-nationalist imagination in the sense that it underpinned the rise of a new and radically violent aesthetics and morality. In paramilitary and ultra-nationalist propaganda, the age-old myth of the heroic and patriotic soldier morphed into the *Gestalt* of a new soldier. The total war of 14-18 utterly destroyed any remains of the age-old myth of the glorious fighter on the battlefield. No longer resembling a classical warrior, the worker-soldier – as Ernst Jünger described him – was cold, mechanic, threatening and seemingly no longer human, with a metal body and a face that merged

seamlessly with the typical steel helmet of the German Stormtrooper (Traverso 2010, 81-83). Jünger claimed that as the future would be nothing but horrible war, it belonged to a revolutionary new morality, which only the true warrior, the steeled worker-soldier who enjoyed the horrors of war, would share (Kühne 2013, 22). Ernst Jünger would never join the Nazi Party, allegedly because he considered the Nazis far too plebeian (Herf 1986, 107). But it is clear that his ideas found their way into Nazi ideology.

From the early 1920s on, the Nazis formed one of the most important parties in the ultra-nationalist movement in post-war Germany. Once they took over power in 1933, they turned the myths about comradeship and violent rebirth in the trenches into official discourse. It is in this sense that, in the words of Enzo Traverso, the First

World War can be seen as a laboratory of Fascism (Traverso 2010, 82-83). According to the Nazi world view, the no-man’s land between the trenches became the symbol of a new ethos of total war. It was framed as a zone where the rule of law was suspended, where existence was confirmed by battle, a place of destruction and death where naked life was exposed to mechanized violence. The experience of trench warfare gave rise to a new ideological alliance between mythology and technology, anti-Enlightenment thinking and political existentialism, nihilism and vitalism, romanticism and futurism. This alliance informed broader strands in the ultra-nationalist universe in post-war Germany, but would receive its ultimate expression in National Socialism. According to Traverso, the war functioned as a powerful catalyst without which the fascist synthesis could not have developed as it eventually did. It was instrumental in giving rise to a new generation of political militants, marked by front experiences, as well as to the formation of ultra-nationalist and racist movements under the leadership of an elite of angry plebeians who cherished the firm conviction that democracy had to be violently replaced by a strong dictatorship.

At the same time, Nazi practices of totalitarian and exterminatory violence were strongly influenced by an ethos and mentality forged in the trenches. The atrocities of the Second World War would have been unthinkable without the experience of battle in the trenches of the First World War. As veterans of the first war, many Nazis had experienced the schizophrenic existence between the normalcy of life behind the front lines and industrial killing in the trenches. German soldiers had come up with a new term to describe this new way of warfare: *Verwüstungsschlacht*, while military strategists referred to it as *Vernichtungskrieg*, a neologism that would eventually take up a central position in Nazi discourse. Death in the trenches had become banal. Later, the Nazis would rephrase this devaluation of human life with their infamous formula of *lebensunwertes Leben*. The first war did not witness crimes comparable to those of the *Einsatzgruppen* at the Eastern Front, but, according to Traverso, the schizophrenic experience of normalcy behind the frontlines and the apocalyptic hell of utter destruction in the trenches opened up a dangerous path (Traverso 2010, 74-79 and 85-86; also see Mosse 1991, 179). Moreover, the habituation to extremely violent and industrialized death led to extreme forms of de-humanization of the enemy not only in military propaganda but also in the press, and even in scientific publications. The First World War thus was an ideal laboratory for the testing of racist stereotypes developed in the last quarter of the 19th century by social Darwinist theory and the medical sciences. It is no coincidence that, in the words of Omer Bartov (cited in Traverso 2010, 79), many Nazis and architects of the *Endlösung* received their “baptism of fire” on the battlefields of WWI.

The war of 14-18 finally introduced mechanized systems of total and industrialized killing that would, in the end and via complex ways, come to a climax in the

– Poster of Stahlhelm, 1929.

– Poster of Stahlhelm, 1929.

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gas chambers in the Nazi death facilities (see Traverso 2010, 72-81). Although they occurred on a much smaller and far less lethal scale than in the Second World War, the deportation, forced employment and internment in concentration camps of subjects of enemy states in WWI intervened violently in the order of things as *fin de siècle* Europe had known them. They signified a new escalation of violence. Extreme violence in concentrations camps did not take place in the First World War and was not part of a conscious strategy of dehumanization and destruction. Nonetheless, as an unforeseen by-product of the war, the internment camps of 14-18 represented, according to Traverso, an important step on the road that Europe took from the 19th century prison to the universe of totalitarian concentration camps (Traverso 2010, 74-79; 85-86).

Experience of battle in the First World War can thus be seen as both a laboratory for fascism and a catalyst of totalitarian violence. Without taking into account the experience of the dehumanization of the enemy and the industrial scale and methods of destruction during the First World War, it is difficult to fully understand the exterminatory practices of National Socialism. ■

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